SHOUT
SHARE
IT

SHE WALKED ON AND ON INTO THE VERY FOREST OF FLAMES

P. 200

RAMA

THE HERO OF INDIA

VALMIKI'S «RAMAYANA» DONE INTO A SHORT ENGLISH VERSION FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

by

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Illustrated

by

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To
GOPAL
Now
Ten Years Old

INTRODUCTION

THE Ramayana and the Mahabharata occupy about the same place in India and the Indies as the Iliad and Odyssey do in Greece and Western Europe. In far-off Java or the French colony of Indo-China the stories derived from India's two epics are acted and recited everywhere. Many of the sculptures, paintings, and even designs on cotton cloth represent ancient Hindu heroes and heroines.

In India itself there is not a Hindu who can not tell you from memory the story of Rama. Though but ten per cent of the population of India can read and write, yet there is hardly a Hindu who is ignorant of the Ramayana. From babyhood on we hear our epics. First our mothers, then our minstrels recite the heroic tales of the ancient times. And as we grow up we learn to recite it for our own pleasure. There are more Hindus who know by heart their classic poets than there are Englishmen who know Shakespeare.

All the classics and Scriptures of India have been taught by word of mouth from generation to generation. The surprising thing is that the people who do not know Sanskrit in which the epics were originally written commit to memory most of their episodes in the modern vernacular render-

ings. For instance, in the province of Bengal seventy million people know Valmiki's Ramayana in a Bengali version by Kirtivasa. In the United Provinces, Behar, and the Punjab every class of society know it in Hindi. The Hindi version of the Rama-story was made from the Sanskrit by the poet-saint Tulsidasa exactly when Milton was writing his Paradise Lost.

Though all the Hindus know their epics in one vernacular rendering or another there is a large minority who can recite it in the original Sanskrit. In Southern India—in Kerala, Malabar, and Cochin—almost all the girls entertain the guests in their homes by rendering the ancient Sanskrit to the accompaniment of a musical instrument in the same manner as a well-born American girl might sing a Wagner aria with a piano accompaniment in order to give pleasure to her father's guests.

Whether in the original or in modern tongues the Sanskrit epics are part of our life in India.

Here we might as well settle the question of the exact date in which the Ramayana was written. Like Homer's Iliad the epic of Valmiki was composed in an age when history was full of legends. No two scholars seem to agree as to the age of Valmiki. Next we all know that the Ramayana was chanted from memory hundreds of years before it was committed to writing. It was written down about 300 B.C. Even then no Hindu bothers to read it. The people

prefer to learn it by word of mouth. And instead of reading aloud as a man reads Shakespeare, Hindus on the contrary chant their classics from memory. The Ramayana is more alive in India than the Iliad is in Greece and Europe where the excessive use of the printed word works to the detriment of their being sung or being quoted as a part of the daily speech of the populace. In the streets of India you can hear the epics quoted within the folk-language as a part of the people's speech. In a word, the Hindu classics are not a thing remote from the people's utterances but contribute to them as springs flow into a living stream.

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PRELUDE

THE SINGER OF THE EPIC SONG RAMAYANA

"BEFORE drinking from the brook examine its source," enjoins the proverb. Before we read the heroic story of Rama it is wise to know the nature of the man who created it. As the singer so must be the song. The vessel that carries pure water must itself be holy and pure.

Was the poet Valmiki as pure and noble as his song, the Ramayana? Was he a man of high attainments? Was learning vibrant in his mind as life is vibrant in the woods at dawn? What was he before he sang the song of Rama?

Alas, he who held the ayana, or mirror, to Rama began life according to legends as a thief. Listen to the strange tale! It is said that in the ages before history there was a

robber named Ratnakar who made his living by attacking travellers in one of the jungles of India. He was so terrible that the beasts feared him as much as men. His prowess was such that he disembowelled tigers with one stroke of his hatchet, and cut off the tusks of an elephant with a single stroke of his sword. He hurled the javelin so well that even the swiftest rhinoceros could not evade his unerring aim, and where the weapon touched it pierced the hard skin of the beast till it reached through his vitals and pinned him to the ground. No, it is no wonder that the robber Ratnakar lived in the jungle unmolested by beasts and birds and the men whom he attacked.

He robbed kings and merchants. It was his pleasure to rob every human being that came his way. But he knew not how to read or write, nor could he sing. Not only was his mind dull but his very soul was dead also and he thought to rob even a holy pilgrim and saint, ignorant that such men own no wealth.

One day the Rishi, greatest of saints, Narada, was making his way through the jungle, singing as he went. Ratnakar hearing his approach sprang upon him, shouting "Halt! Thou shalt not pass without forfeiting to me either thy wealth or thy life!" The saint, hoary-headed and unafraid, answered in this wise: "O thou fierce-visaged one, with beard black and menacing as a hive of hornets, dost thou attack innocent travellers for pleasure?"

"No, I am bent on profit. My name is Ratnakar, which means a mine of gems. I plunder kings, caravans and traders to enrich myself. Therefore I demand either thy life or thy wealth."

"Marry, sir," answered the Rishi Narada, "I am a holy man, I own no wealth: I live to preach God, Vishnu, whom I have seen."

"What order of man art thou to have no wealth?" demanded the robber incredulously.

The saint replied: "O eyes of burning covetousness, hast thou never looked upon a saint? I am one of those, for I prayed to Vishnu, the Supreme Being, for many years until, pleased with my devotion, he made me immortal and gave me courage to live without wealth which I no longer need. You can take my life, brother, for that is all I own."

But Ratnakar was not to be hoodwinked: "How can I take your life if God made you immortal?"

"Well then, dear thief," replied the Holy One, "I am indeed sorry for thee! God has made me so destitute that I cannot even give thee my life. Indeed I am not worth the trouble of being accosted by thee."

"Nevertheless thou shalt not pass," roared Ratnakar: "If God has made thee immortal and brave enough to live without a single possession thou shalt teach me how to snatch from God an equal power. I, too, would be immortal. Of all jewels this is the most priceless, O Saint."

"The price of immortality is very heavy, brother," said the Rishi.

"What care I for prices!" thundered Ratnakar. "Am I a base trader? Or am I a noble plunderer? Demand what thou wilt, it shall be thine."

"Good, the bargain is struck," answered the saint. "Listen, and I will instruct thee in the highest Heaven. I have heard the following rumour. The terrible one, the ten-headed and twenty-handed monster Ravana arose in Lanka (Ceylon). So powerful was he that he captured all the lower heavens and made the gods and their chief Indra (the Hindu Jupiter) his slaves. For centuries now have they served the monster in Lanka until through their suffering the gods have been led to pray the One Supreme, Vishnu, to incarnate himself on earth. For as our religion teaches, 'Whenever virtue is defeated and vice is victorious then God is incarnated as man to liberate the righteous.' 'The hour has come, O Vishnu,' prayed all the lesser Gods. The prayer of the captive Gods will be answered soon. Therefore this is the command I lay upon thee, brother, by which thou shalt earn the jewel of thy desire. Go thou into solitude, thief though thou art. There pray and meditate. In the course of thy meditation thou shalt attain to such spiritual power that sitting here thou shalt witness the next reincarnation of God and the War in which He is to take part. Make thy vision into an immortal song which men will read

Parin

THE ANTS CAME
AND BUILT THEIR ANTHILLS
AROUND
AND ABOVE HIM

P. 7

and recite in every age, and thus immortality will be thine!"

"But, sir," expostulated the robber, "how can I, who know not how to read or write, compose an epic song?"

"Pray and meditate continually," enjoined Narada, "and all that thou hast need to know will be revealed unto thee." With these words the holy man vanished from Ratnakar's presence, like a dream. Thus was proved to the thief the authenticity of the Saint, for none but the greatest Rishi possessed of miraculous powers could have thus faded out of sight like an apparition.

Fully convinced therefore that the holy one had told him the truth, Ratnakar then and there forsook the evil ways of a bandit. He sought the bank of the holy river Ganges and sat himself down in the posture of Yoga meditating. Hours passed, the sun set, tigers roared as they roamed in the jungle, herds of elephants passed by him, yet unafraid he continued his meditation sunk in a deep abyss of prayers. The night turned into day, the day in turn gave birth to another night; yet Ratnakar unconscious of the external world ceased not his spiritual communion. At last while days became years and years had made themselves into ages, the ants came and built their anthills around and above him, without interrupting the thief's meditation. By now he was a heap of anthills and nothing more.

At last one day he attained the greatest spiritual power.

He beheld the latest reincarnation of God as Rama. Having thus won his object he arose from meditation. The anthills fell apart as he got to his feet. Looking around himself he exclaimed, "Behold, I am Valmiki—a man cloaked in anthills!" It is by this name the world knows him today.

Now he bathed himself in the sacred river and filling his pitcher with holy water he began to walk towards the jungle. But just as he reached the first mango tree he saw two herons embracing on its branch. Their love-making reminded him of the love of Rama and his bride which he had witnessed in his meditation. The love of the birds ravished his outer eyes as that of God and his bride had thrilled the eye of his soul. Suddenly an arrow came through the air and pierced one of the herons. It shrieked and fell dead on the ground. The unwounded male flew up and filled the sky with its wail of despair. Withdrawing his gaze from the bird above Valmiki sought its dead mate below. Lo, he beheld the hunter who had shot the arrow and was now about to put the poor heron in his bag.

At the sight of the murderous hunter Valmiki was transfigured into a column of rage. His lips opened in spite of himself and launched this curse upon the slayer: "Ma nishada pratistham twamagamah shasvati samah — Treacherous and accursed thou. Had these birds not been made sightless with love, they would have seen thy coming. But thou, who didst slay a creature love-deaf and love-blind

powerless to escape, now on thee lies my curse. For such a foul deed thou shalt never attain to any glory at least on earth."

Then Valmiki stooped down and poured from his pitcher the healing waters of the Ganges on the dead heron. The bird was revived on the instant and flew to its mate clamorous with life and love. Seeing her flying in the air, Valmiki felt compassion on the dejected and cowering fowler. "Go thy way," he charged, "thou too shalt be immortal. Wherever men listen to the story of Rama they shall hear of thee. Thus thou shalt attain to glory. But thy deed, how strange—thy deed has unlocked my lips. The sorrow (Soka) of the birds has given me the secret of (Sloka) song."

Thus began the epic poetry of the Ramayana. Such an incident as that which wrung from Valmiki's lips his first sloka is ever the greatest creator of poetry. For in all ages it is the sorrow of the lover that gives birth to the song of a poet.

In his hermitage on the edge of the jungle Valmiki dwelt and made his sloka — songs. There came to him boys and girls from all parts of India to learn to sing the Ramayana. They acquired first the secret of sounds and music. Then they mastered the magic of meaning that crouches like a lion in the lair of words. Last of all they were taught to recite the heroic Ayana of Rama to the ringing of silver

cords and the beat of drum. At last when they had mastered the proper diction and volume of tone they were sent forth to sing as parivrajakas, or minstrels, at the courts of kings, marts of merchants, and the communal threshing floors of the tillers in every hamlet, celebrating the story of the manhood of Rama who saved the world from Ravana the demon, and of the faith of Rama's wife, Sita.

Thus from the beginning when Valmiki composed it until this day, the Song of Rama—The Ramayana—travels on the lips of minstrels to the souls of all that live in India. Valmiki's first pupils were the very sons of Rama himself. They in turn, the story goes, trained others to sing and so from generation to generation, the Ramayana descended through Rama's own flesh and blood to the Hindu minstrels of today. Even now in India a few souls read it: through ears ravished by the chanting of the parivrajakas it enters the hearts of men. Each parivrajaka imagines himself to be Valmiki as he begins his recital. It follows thus: After I had meditated centuries clothed with nothing but anthills, suddenly God kindled and gave sight to the eye of my soul. So I beheld at the threshold of the highest Heaven the Gods under their ruler Indra praying Vishnu, the Supreme Being, to deliver them from their servitude to the Rakshasa monster, the ten-headed King Ravana of Lanka (Ceylon). The Gods must have prayed for thousands of years. At last Vishnu being pleased with their devotion opened his lotus-

shaming eyes and answered them, "O ye Gods, ye have suffered enough, ye shall now be freed from the monster's toils. But since no god nor demigod can kill Ravana, for he knows all arts and artifices, I myself must be born as man in order to destroy his dominion. Man he despises so that he has never learned what dwells in man's heart. Beasts too, such as monkeys, those near-men, he has not understood. Therefore let us take the shapes which his arrogance ignores.

"In order to put an end to him and his hundreds of thousands of goblins, trolls, gnomes and demigod followers, we must rear a vast army of our own. You will be that vast army reborn as monkeys, that I, in the human form of Rama, shall lead against Ravana and his two brothers. But know also this, that once we are born in the forms of ape and man we shall not remember what is now passing in Heaven. Like all mortals we shall depend on chance to bring us together. May we seek each out successfully, may you as monkeys make good soldiers, quick to attack and slow to retreat. May I as man have wisdom and will enough to lead you into Lanka and victory.

"Go forth now into the mortal world. Choose the jungle of Southern India and incarnate yourselves as sons of the apes and baboons that live there. Farewell!"

Soon in the jungles of Southern India monkey-mothers gave birth to such luminous sons that they shamed the sun

shining by day and the stars that caparison the black stallion of night. Not only was their beauty great but their prowess too surpassed the measurings of our mind. There was born an ape, Vali, at birth vast as a blue hill and beauteous as the lightning-garlanded cloud, who was none other than Indra incarnated as monkey. Sugriva his brother, bright as the snow-haired peak was the Sun-god capering from branch to branch. And next to those two in grandeur was the baboon Hanuman, whose real name was Pavana, the god of wind and storm. In his monkey-frame he was hard as adamant, fleeter than Garuda the thunder-bird, and his judgment was clear-swift as the lightning. Then incarnated Jambuban the god of wisdom, half bear and half ape. As a monkey he was too foolish to be wise and as a bear too sleepy to have any brains. That gave him a double disguise under which he hid his identity. After him followed Gods assuming the form of other near-men; and their numbers grew so large that even the forest leaves were fewer than they.

They were all endowed with strength unbelievable and miraculous powers. Being gods they could shrink to the size of a mouse or expand into that of a mountain at will. No matter how small or large a monkey, each one was like a lion in pride, a panther in agility, and all of them when they played wrenched crags for exercise, or hurled hills for balls at one another. Their nails and teeth were sharper

than swords. They could move large mountains as men move bricks; tall trees they crushed between their palms as a child breaks a reed, and their clamorous impetuosity vexed the lord of the rivers—the ocean. Thus grew a vast army of monkeys unknown to Ravana, Lanka's monster king, exercising and drilling themselves into phalanxes and cohorts of victory.

In the meantime in the house of Dasaratha, the king of men of Ayodhya (Northern India), his three queens gave birth to four sons. Eldest of these was Rama—Vishnu in human form. He was born of Kausalya the good, the second son, Bharata, was born of Kaikeyi the wicked, and the twins, Lakshmana and Satrughna, of Sumitra the sweet. From birth Lakshmana attached himself to Rama and Satrughna to Bharata, like shadows that cling to substance. And the four brothers grew as the augmenting digits of the moon.

Why was Rama born in the house of Dasaratha? Because Raja Dasaratha was the foremost king, and because he was a pure-hearted man whose virtues were praised by all who lived in his time. To reward him for his goodness God chose the king for father. But there was a curse on Dasaratha which shall unfold itself as events follow events in this Ayana, mirror to life, that I am singing. As if to fulfill that curse King Dasaratha, a mere puppet in the hand of fate, married his three wives. But of that later, like fruits in proper season.

Rama grew with his brothers. Now that he was God no more, but a little mortal, heir to human whims and hopes, he longed for the impossible day and night. Mortal, he was as troubled now as he was once serene in Godhood. At the age of five he lay at sundown in Queen Kausalya's lap. They had gone to take the air on the palace roof and remained to watch the dusk slide down like walls of silence. Soon the stars preened their silver wings. Then in a stride came Chandra. The child asked for the amber orb—the moon. "Pluck that fruit from the blue tree above, mother, and give it to me to play with." His mortal's prattle, though engaging, struck like a bolt the mind of the queen. Though royal, she was but human, a mere dwarf, how could she reach Chandra in the heights of the sky! But the boy on her lap would give her no peace. "Chandra or nothing," he screamed raging like a true divinity. Kausalya though ravished by his majesty in rage was perplexed at his insistent cry for the white dancer of paradise. Unable to cope with Rama she sent for the King. Alas, though a Raja, even Dasaratha was made to realize that he was powerless to satisfy his son's whim. "Moon or nothing," the child whimpered and sobbed in Kausalya's arms. The King, utterly helpless, sent for his royal astronomer. "Please pluck for my son," he begged, "the moon from the sky!" That white-bearded Vashistha, astronomer royal, counsellor, teacher, and holy man, produced a mirror from under his tunic.

Gently he gave it to Rama. Slowly he taught the boy to shift and hold it at an angle till it caught the orb. Rama cried with joy as the mirror imprisoned the moon for him. The very God of night now he held in his fist! That made Rama so happy at last that in a few moments he fell asleep.

THE BENDING OF THE BOW AND THE MARRIAGE OF RAMA

UNTIL they were sixteen Rama, and his three half-brothers, Lakshmana, Bharata and Satrughna were taught archery, swordsmanship, wielding the club, and wrestling. Thus were their bodies developed. For the development of their minds they were instructed in music, sagas and philosophy. By the time they were past sixteen all the royal youths had grown into men of excellent parts.

It was at about that time that Rama and Lakshmana went on their first adventure.

One day while they were seated in the court of Dasaratha

studying their father's way of administering justice, like a silver cloud entered an old man of saintly bearing and announced his purpose.

"I am Visvamitra, one of the Kings who renounced royal life many years ago to go in quest of God. Through harsh discipline and patient labour I found favour in the Eye of Truth. Since then I have lived in a hermitage in the jungle where I teach young men and women the art of meditation. We light sacrificial fires with sandalwood and feed the flames with Ghreeta—butter. In course of time seated in meditation around the fire some of my disciples attain a vision of God. They behold him as I see you."

"O sage," answered Dasaratha, rising to his feet, "I salute you. I am a king of temporal things. It is enjoined upon us who rule mortals to do honour to those who seek and serve the immortal. This capital city of mine with its ramparts of gold and its wealth of gems are as dust under your feet. If there is anything you desire here, speak—it is yours for the asking."

"Be seated, O tiger amongst men," and with these words Visvamitra blessed the entire court. After the King and courtiers and the princes had sat down the saint said, "You have promised to give whatever I desire. Give me your two sons—Rama and Lakshmana."

"This is a strange request. Do you wish to train them in meditation?"

To that question of the King, Visvamitra answered, "I need them to wage a war for me. Our hermitage is frequently invaded and polluted by two evil spirits and their innumerable followers. Their names are Taraka and Maricha, her son. The mother is of an ugly visage—large as an elephant, vicious as a serpent. She lives on human beings. Her son Maricha is no better. These two with their spirit followers are driving me out of my hermitage. They quench my sacrificial fire with blood. Over our sandalwood they throw the bones and meat of their victims. We cannot live in our jungle any more nor can we practice any religious rites. Will you lend me Rama and Lakshmana, of whose prowess and skill I have heard till the very echoes tell me from every side that they alone can kill the monsters and rid my hermitage of their sinister presence?"

Dasaratha and the court pondered in silence for a while. Everyone was afraid for the fate of Rama and Lakshmana. The King who loved his sons dearly begged Visvamitra to ask for a lesser thing. "Do not take my sons of tender age from me. They are sure to perish in an uneven encounter with Taraka and her monsters. O saint of excellent fame, do not ask for my sons!"

"Am I speaking to Dasaratha, or to a kinglet of a kingdom no larger than a pebble?" The saint was very angry. "Either keep your word which you gave me at first or I go hence proclaiming to the world how unkingly is the king

Dasaratha." At this point, Rama, aware of his father's difficulty, arose to his feet and said, "O royal father, permit me to speak. Permit me, O saint of supreme worth, to speak for myself and my brother Lakshmana who is a compeller of victory. With him I will gladly go whithersoever thou leadest. My father has given his word. As an elephant's tusks which never recede into (the tusker's) mouth so is my father's promise. It shall not be withdrawn. I beg you, O royal father, let us go with this sage and put to the test our knowledge of archery and swordsmanship."

Lakshmana, who had already risen and was standing by Rama, as the shadow by the light, spoke also earnest words to King Dasaratha. "So be it," said the King. "Only brave and worthy sons would undertake such a task. My heart is glad and I feel sure that our ancestors in Heaven are rejoicing to hear you speak so nobly. Saint Visvamitra, I entrust my two eyes—Rama and Lakshmana—to your keeping."

After taking leave of their mothers and their brothers, Bharata and Satrughna, the two princes set out with Visvamitra. The saint was unarmed, but the youths were armed with invincible weapons, like twin Gods of Death, so terrible was the look of determination upon their faces.

They went first towards the east, then south and crossed the Ganges. There the sage told the youths to bathe in its sacred waters and recite the Gayatri at sunset. After they

had performed their ablutions they had meditated and chanted as follows:

"O thou mirror of the past, the present and the future!
We invoke the excellent sun,
May he, the deity of light, illuminate our souls!

"Asato ma sat gamaya
Tamaso ma jyotir gamaya
Mrityur ma amtiram gamaya.

"O God, lead us from the unreal to the real,
Lead us from darkness into light,
Lead us from death into immortality."

After it had grown quite dark they came out of their meditation. Their ability to pray was so great that the saint, pleased with the two young men, said, "O Rama, I have been ravished by your power of meditation. You, Lakshmana, are religion itself. Since you are both so pure and spiritual I will add to you new strength. Your souls are so chaste that you will never abuse the privileges that shall be yours presently. Allow me to impart them to you. O Lakshmana, O Rama, I give you the Vata and Ativata prayers, for their power will free you—the one from hunger and the other from thirst. They will armour your body from within."

Hardly had the saint finished speaking when from the nearby jungle rose terror-barbed sounds that wounded and

clung to the hearing of the three mortals. They were the noise of rejoicing emitted by the evil spirits, Taraka, Maricha and their ghastly retinue. Rama and Lakshmana strung their bows and waited for their attack. But naught came their way that night.

Next morning after bathing in the Ganges and performing their prayers and other rites they entered the jungle. Hardly had they traversed half of it when they were pelted with bones and flesh. Knowing that Taraka, Maricha and their followers were upon them, Rama and Lakshmana drew their bows. Rama hurled the arrow of light from his bow. That instant its fire dispelled all the black sorcery of the monsters. Taraka, an elephantine woman with a head like a burning furnace, attacked them. Rama rained arrows on her while Lakshmana held at bay her followers. On and on she came like a forest fire devouring everything with its flames. Though Rama's arrows cut off her hands, ears and nose, still she came. Inevitable like a flood of molten metal she plunged onward. At last he pulled out his choicest arrow called Brahma astra—the edge of God. His bowstring hummed like a thousand hives of bees. The arrow leaped forward and sped through the air as doom itself on the last hour of creation. In order to screen herself Taraka breathed out smoke as though black pythons curled forth through her nostrils, but to no avail. The edge of God pierced her throat and flung her down with its

momentum. The arrow's end vibrated in the air. Taraka's death-cry was horrible to the ear. She shouted and wailed louder than the tempest-stung seas.

No sooner had she breathed her last than her infuriated offspring, Maricha, tall as a hill or a summer cloud of black, fell upon Rama. There was no space for the drawing of the bow, so Rama flung it away and leaping at his adversary buried his battle-axe in his heart. With the clamour of a million terror-stricken souls Maricha fell. And where he fell the trees were crushed under him into pulp. His carcass obliterated half the forest. Under his arms that lay jutting out of his body, innumerable tigers and elephants were buried.

In the meantime Lakshmana had killed the other demons. Then the two young men wiped their respective weapons clean, and sheathed them. Visvamitra, rejoicing, said to them, "Lo, do you hear far-off voices? They are hermits who, now delivered from Taraka and Maricha, are thanking you. Come, my sons, to my own hermitage where my disciples will minister to your wants. Simple and austere though our lives be our hearts are boundless with gratitude because of the service you have done us."

That day and night they spent in Visvamitra's company. Next sunrise after the usual Gayatri, meditation, and other morning rites, Visvamitra said to the two warrior youths, "O diadems of courage, you have discharged your duty to

the weak as all kings should. As trustees and servants of the people you have shown abundant competence. It is now meet, since you have been proven worthy, that you should be given initiation into the finest secrets of arms. But first, always remember to practice control of yourself, for he who controls himself is strong enough to control the world: and never abuse your powers, either through deeds or speech. Ill-spoken words destroy as much as unthinking acts."

Rama and Lakshmana both vowed to observe silence and self-control; and promised not to use idle words or indulge in senseless deeds.

Then Visvamitra, who knew the secret of the arrow of Vengeance, imparted it to them. He told them of the quality of its steel, the nature of its shape, and the length of its shaft. It was like the serpent of Heaven—the lightning. Next he divulged to them the secret of pasa, the lasso of Justice. If there be any man who has committed wrong let him confess to a King who possesses the lasso of Justice. For none can escape its loop. That pasa runs at night as by day, it runs through the visible as well as the invisible world. Like a flood running underground it reaches on and on without rest or respite until it traps the wrong-doer, no matter where he abides. After the pasa of Justice, he bestowed on the princes the weapon called the spear of Fate. Then he gave them two fair burning clubs, the torches of

Death, and after that he entrusted to them all the weapons of the Gods: Brahma's head, Shiva's dart, and the Wind God's quiver. Last of all he gave them the power to make rain, that weapon of the stars, and the witchery of the Moon. Thus all spells of magic were added to their armoury of arrows and javelins.

Hardly had the saint finished initiating the princes in the mysteries of arms when one of Visvamitra's disciples brought news that King Janaka of Mithila had announced the Swayamvara of Sita (the bridal of Sita, his daughter) and the bending of Haradhanu, the King's great bow. The news seemed to quicken the saint's insight and he said, "It is auspicious indeed, O Rama, the King of Mithila has a beauteous daughter, her name is Sita. Thrice since Sita passed her fifteenth year the Hindu princes have come to court her but none could win her hand, for none could bend her father's terrible bow. Janaka says that when Sita was born he heard a voice from Heaven saying, 'She will marry him who can bend the Haradhanu—the bow of Immortality strung with string of death, the deadly weapon of Shiva.' But each time heretofore that the trial had been made at the Swayamvara neither prince nor god had been able to bend that bow. But come now with me, young men, to the new Swayamvara, the assembly of Sita, for either you or Lakshmana can bend Haradhanu."

So the two princes went with Visvamitra toward Mithila.

They traversed a jungle or two and killed demons and evil spirits that infested those woods, thus earning the gratitude of men and women wherever they happened to pass.

About the fourth day of their march they beheld at a distance the capital of Mithila. Its ramparts and battlements raised haughty brows against the blue twilight. Their beauty was so great that the royal youths and the saint halted for a while to enjoy the sight fully.

When at last they entered the city, night had fallen. They were surprised at the illumination of the streets and the abundance of elephants, horsemen and Kings. Though Rama and Lakshmana walked on foot with their saintly companion, by their bearing the passers-by recognized that they were royal and perhaps even greater than kings. At the gates of the palace of King Janaka, Visvamitra made known the identity of his companions. At once those tree-tall gates of beaten gold were flung open, and all three were ushered into the presence of Janaka. There they beheld a marvellous sight. In that high vaulted marble chamber inwrought with designs of precious stones, sat Janaka conversing with his two daughters, Sita more beautiful than the nymphs of paradise, and her younger sister Urmila. The moment she beheld Rama a shock of recognition ran through him. Where had he seen her before—in what celestial city? He knew not that when half of him incarnated

as Rama the other half was born as the daughter of Mithila's King. Sita was as divine as he. Not her unspeakable beauty but something else about her smote him—what was it? Alas, being now a mortal the meaning of the mystery escaped him. What he beheld before him was only the most beautiful woman that man had ever seen. Sita too experienced the same wonder when she beheld Rama—what mysterious recognition was this—not only the greatest and the bravest of men stood before her but someone unspeakably divine. In Rama she perceived Tat (That) which pulled at the very root of her own being. Perhaps that evening the porphyry and the emerald lamps shone too dimly for Rama and Sita to see each other very clearly.

That night the two princes and Visvamitra spent in a wing of the palace allotted to them by Janaka. Next morning they were roused from deep slumber by the Nahavat —flute-playing—at every street corner of the city. This ancient custom still continues in many old towns of India. Townspeople should be called out of sleep by sweet sounds so that their souls may not be awakened in their bodies by harsh and evil-creating cries and screams. Sudden sharp noises arousing a man from slumber smother the reasoning soul in him, and unhinge his mind.

After they had said their prayers and finished their morning's meal the princes were called to the royal pavilion to witness the Swayamvara. In the outer court of the palace

were assembled all the princes of the world, their swords hanging by their sides, their gem-studded turbans stabbing the beholder's eye with colour; and their cerise, white, sapphire, gold and purple dresses were an enchantment of beautiful designs. All the men were standing, for they were waiting to see the Haradhanu, the divine bow, brought out of the palace by the servants of the house. Lo, instead came forth King Janaka, noble as a summer cloud wrapped with the sky, leading Sita. Her beauty smote the royal youths like a scimitar. But Sita though overpowering in beauty was gracious as the moon who shines with equal effulgence on the hut of the poor and the haughty home of the rich.

Janaka mounted the dais at one corner of the assembly. He signed to the doors of his palace whence like magic issued innumerable servants bent over and crawling like insects under the weight of a vast bow. It was heavy beyond describing. The servants panted and groaned as they bore the bow of the Gods up to the steps of the dais. Janaka now took it from them as a mother lifts a child. At that, words of felicitation and wonder issued from the lips of the assembled young princes and kings. Janaka shook his silver mane and said, "He who bends this bow of the God shall win the hand of Sita. This bow Shiva gave my ancestors to test their strength and bravery. In our body flows the sap of titanic strength. Only he who

is as strong as we can lift and string the bow. And since an equal may marry an equal, the warrior who bends Haradhanu shall be the lord of Sita my daughter who stands beside me."

One prince ignorant of his own weakness went forward. But what humiliation lay in store for him! The moment King Janaka let go of Haradhanu the bow almost crushed the poor wight under it. The king leaped forward and saved it from utterly destroying that weak and witless prince. Then strutted forward another, bent on essaying the task of stringing the Haradhanu. He, though strong enough to sustain its weight, could not bend it. After he had fled the assembly in shame, came forward a third prince. He, too, could not bend the terrible bow. Thus one by one all of them essayed the task and abandoned the bow as a frightened man draws back from a rope that suddenly under his gaze takes on the image of a python.

At last Rama walked towards the dais. Wherever his shadow fell there was conferred the touch of majesty. He moved forward like a mountain walking. He stood facing Janaka, a young god gazing into an old man's eyes: Rama panoplied with youth and Janaka destitute of all but wisdom.

Humbly Rama begged for the bow and slowly he lifted his hands to receive it. Without even bending his arm the young prince sustained its heavy weight. Slowly he lifted

Parin

APPLYING HIS FOOT IN THE MIDDLE HE BENT THE DIRE INSTRUMENT

P. 31

it as a tusker lifts an ancient tree. Applying his foot in the middle he bent and strung the dire instrument. Now he pulled the string that hummed like a thunderbolt. But Rama neither heard its humming nor listened to the applause of the wonder-struck assembled kings. He applied his two hands to the two ends of the bow and bent it more. Still further he pressed. At last inch by inch that stiff tall column of strength bent till its two ends met. Then, with a deafening roar like the rivening of the earth at creation's end, the bow broke and lay at Rama's feet. Thus he proved himself an equal of Janaka's royal line, and thus he won the hand of Sita, than whom no fairer maiden has ever been seen by men.

That very same day Janaka sent his family priest and ambassadors to Ayodhya with the following message: "O emperor of men, O lion-hearted sire of Rama, thy son has broken the divine bow and won the hand of Sita. Now come hither with priests and relatives to celebrate the nuptial of thy son! I also beg to unseal to thee my belief that my other daughter Urmila and thy second son Lakshmana love each other. If thou givest thy august consent they, too, shall be married at the same time."

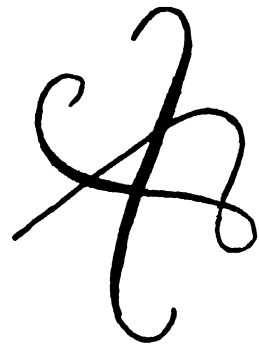
At once King Dasaratha ordered all to be made ready, and with his two other sons and a proper retinue of priests, astrologers and hymn-singers, set out for the domains of Mithila.

In the meantime Janaka had sent for his brother and vassal Kusadhvaja from a neighbouring kingdom. Kussadhvaja came with his two daughters to be bridesmaids to Sita and Urmila. But at the wedding the three kings knew that Rama's younger brothers—Bharata and Satrughna—loved these two maidens, the cousins of Sita, so they also were married with proper rites and ceremonies.

When they returned to their own kingdom all Ayodhya declared a long holiday and feasted. No man or beast went hungry during that period. And all the priests, poets and philosophers of the whole of Northern India met at Ayodhya to hymn, praise and discuss religion, poetry and philosophy. It is said that the philosophers disputed with such lucidity that the very cows of the field understood their arguments. The poets sang so marvellously that their magic muted the birds of the air. It is related that the priests in the fervour of their religion, fasted and hymned God so incessantly that they forgot to eat during the entire thirty days' celebration. It proved that Rama was loved intensely by all. Everyone was willing to undergo anything in order to augment the good omen that attended his nuptials.

Toward the end of the month came Guhaka, the king of the hunters, with wild boars, black buffaloes, samboors (big bucks) and fowls of all kinds killed by himself in the jungle. When the populace saw cartload after cartload of such meat they declared another month's holiday in

order to feast properly on the presents of Guhaka. Now poured into the city hunters from jungle depths to finish the celebration of their friend Rama's wedding. They and the four princes held amazing tourneys for a whole week. If a hunter shot a high flying eagle no bigger than a dot in the highest sky, Rama sent an arrow at night that brought down a star in the morning. Such were the astounding feats performed in the days of yore when kings with their own hands accomplished labours too mighty for peasants and toilers today.



RAMA'S CORONATION AND EXILE

A YEAR after Rama's marriage King Dasaratha decided to retire from the cares of state. He wished to renounce the world so that he could dedicate the rest of his life, as the Hindu scriptures enjoined, to the quest of God. First, twenty years of a man's life should be spent in acquiring knowledge, the next twenty-five in rearing a family, and the rest in the company of holy men and philosophers to learn from them the way of God-experience.

Dasaratha now felt the time had come for him to retire into a monastery and spend his days in prayer, philosophy and meditation. He announced to Kausalya, Rama's mother, his decision. Overjoyed at the news that her own

son Rama would be anointed King the following week, she, none the less, listened most carefully to the King's words. "It is not necessary to divide my kingdom into four. Since all my other sons love and worship Rama they will be only too happy to serve him as his ministers and deputies. As for my subjects, agents have informed me that nothing will please them more than to have me elect Rama their king. So bowing to their wish I have arranged that Rama on the seventh morn from this day will be crowned King of all my realm. He will administer the state with vigour, grace and wisdom. Now at last I am free to go in quest of Truth and to employ worthily whatever time is left me by the Supreme Being."

It took nearly a whole week to make the capital ready for the happy event. Gates of bamboo were constructed at each crossing. They were festooned with vines and flowers till not an inch of bamboo could be seen. Under them were stationed royal servants with pitchers of cool drink and baskets of sweetmeats. Anyone needing refreshments could partake of them at each gate as he wandered from street to street. Strolling players came from all corners of the earth and gave free performances. They played comedies and miracle plays day and night. Serpent charmers and animal performers of all kinds pitched their tents in the adjacent fields. Ambassadors from far-off kingdoms brought presents. From Ceylon came shiploads of pearls;

from China jade, silk and tea; from Persia enamel, cameo and lapis-lazuli. From Golconda came diamonds big as white chrysanthemums, and Burma's ambassadors brought rubies large as red roses. From the kingdom of Mitani and the son-in-law of Dasaratha, Akhnaton of Egypt, came sapphires, chalcedony, garnets, amber, and amethyst in alabaster chests, also illumined papyrus manuscripts that contained the Book of Life and the Secrets of Dreams. Untravelled though Rama was, the fragrance of his soul had blown with and against every wind to all the civilized countries of his time. His being, which men call soul, was so beautifully developed that it drew the love of races never seen by his eyes, as a lotus draws the bees whose humming is an unknown language to it. Small wonder then that his name was Rama—the ravisher of hearts.

But alas, there were two hearts that Rama had failed to charm. His step-mother Kaikeyi and her humpback wench Manthara were jealous of his beauty and power, though Bharata the son of Kaikeyi, strange to say, loved Rama devotedly he could not persuade his mother to feel any affection for the matchless one.

On the eve of Rama's coronation, seeing the city of Ayodhya in delirium of ecstasy, Manthara the humpback said to Queen Kaikeyi, "O mistress mine, the most beautiful and youthful of the queens of Dasaratha, exert your power over your husband. Make him abandon Rama and

crown your son Bharata instead. Do you not see that if Rama is enthroned his mother Kausalya will rule all through him? Once your husband renounces the throne Kausalya will avenge herself. For bear in mind, mistress, you are the King's favourite queen, and he abandoned her for the sake of your youth and beauty. No mistake exists in my mind. If Rama ascends his father's throne he will make life a serpent's nest for you. Now, therefore, send for the King, your husband, and ask him to banish Rama and crown Bharata sovereign supreme." Kaikeyi however replied, "But hast thou forgotten, Manthara, that Bharata is far away on a visit to my brother, his uncle? How can he be crowned now in Rama's place even if I were to persuade my lord the King to dispossess his Rama?"

"There is all the more reason that you endeavour to set aside Rama's succession. Remember, mistress, your son loves Rama too much. If he were here Bharata would prevent my scheme. It is better that he be out of sight. The King must abandon Rama and proclaim publicly Bharata's coronation as soon as he returns with Satrughna from their visit."

"I cannot, I cannot without consulting Bharata," exclaimed the temptation-tortured Kaikeyi.

"You must. Otherwise," reiterated Manthara, her humpback almost straightening with hate, "Kausalya, your rival, will rule through Rama and poison all your days and

dreams. She will have you banished for taking away the King's love and charming him to your whims."

"Thou forgettest, O crooked soul, that my husband loves Rama more than he loves me." Kaikeyi sighed, and added, "How can I persuade him to disinherit Rama? Enlighten me?"

But Manthara undaunted, replied, "That, too, I have planned, O mistress. Not the crookedness of my soul but the thought of your welfare leads me on. Do you forget that when the King lay dying after the terrible battle with the fiends ten years ago it was you who nursed him to life?" Kaikeyi well remembered this. "It was you," went on Manthara, "who pulled out the poisoned arrow from his neck. It was you who sucked the poison from the wound with these lips. You risked all to save him," Manthara elaborated the incident. "You spat out the poison into my hand and I poured it into the fire, for fire alone could destroy its effect. Three days and two nights you and I toiled to save him. Did we desist until he was healed?"

"But, Manthara, that was long ago."

"Yes, mistress," rejoined the humpback, "but have you forgotten that because your nursing saved his life the King begged you to ask of him two favours, and you replied, 'Not now will I take reward from you, my Lord, but at some future time, to prove the endurance of your memory.' The King answered, 'My word is given. Whenever

you demand of me I will grant you two favours, O beloved Queen.' Have you forgotten, have you forgotten?" croaked Manthara.

"Indeed, now that you have kindled the embers of my memory into tongues of flame I remember all." Kaikeyi pondered and recreated the past as though it were before her. But Manthara roused her from day-dreaming, "Now, now is the time to demand of him the two favours! Insist that he banish Rama into the jungle for many years and crown Bharata King in his stead."

As if the thunder of heaven had smitten her Kaikeyi paled with terror at Manthara's last speech. "What unheard-of cunning! What stratagem this," she heard her own voice crying.

"Remember Kausalya your rival," Manthara hissed. Her thought caught fire at the very notion that through Rama Kausalya might rule the kingdom and Kaikeyi too. Her heart hardened into basalt, and she sent Manthara to fetch the King. Soon after the Raja Dasaratha had seated himself Kaikeyi uncovered her thoughts to her husband. He was unbelief itself when he heard her say, "Grant me my two boons. Banish Rama for at least fourteen years, and crown my own Bharata King."

Dasaratha sat speechless. He acted like a dreamer unable to shake off a monstrous dream. Kaikeyi repeated her demand and still the old rajah heeded her not. Then, shaking

him she cried, "If thou keepest not thy promise I will tell Rama himself what a coward his father is. Manthara, send for Rama. Hasten, thou crooked back." Ere the King could forbid, that bent-double wench had sped, fleeter than a hurled javelin. Rama cunningly she informed before he saw his father, of the King's predicament. She knew beforehand how directly and honourably the noble-souled Rama would act, so she told him with pretended sorrow that his father must keep his promise given to Kaikeyi ten years ago when she had saved his life. As they made their way through the palace to where Kaikeyi awaited them, they heard the sounds and shouts of joy rising like incense from the city. There was something holy about the occasion. But alas, those throngs in the streets of Ayodhya did not know the bitter events that fate was gathering to hurl upon them on the morrow. At last Manthara led him to Kaikeyi's chambers.

When Rama saw his distraught father, no doubt remained in his mind that the hunchback Manthara had told him the truth. He spoke to Kaikeyi first, "O Queen, do you wish my father to keep his word and grant you these two boons?" Without a pause that shameless woman answered, "You must go into exile for fourteen years and Bharata must rule as your father's successor."

Rama, his heart shrinking as a fawn in the coils of a python, replied, "My father has never spoken idle words.

Whatever he says is and must remain true. On the morrow I go into exile in order to fulfill my father's promise to you." Then gravely saluting Dasaratha and Kaikeyi, the ravisher of hearts went to announce the fateful news to Sita.

Then Dasaratha too arose. He cursed Kaikeyi and fled from her chamber staggering blindly through the palace rooms. Exhausted with anguish of mind he reached the wing where dwelt Queen Kausalya, Rama's mother. There he dropped upon the porphyry floor and wept bitterly. She, who had already heard of Rama's terrible decision, wept with him, crying, "Ah, Rama, Rama, my son."

In the meantime that crown of manhood was urging Sita to stay at home and not to accompany him to the jungles of the south. But Sita pled with him, "Wherever Rama goes thither will Sita follow. My place is beside thee, my lord. If thou abide upon the throne I too sit with thee, but if thou go to dwell among beasts and demons there also shall be my place."

"Sita, daughter of a King thou art. Luxury has been thy footstool, comfort thy sandals, pleasure thy companion, and thy mantle peace. How canst thou endure the terrible jungle life? I go where man is rarely seen. There wild elephants roam. Tigers kill and devour men. Fiends at night molest those who sleep. Bethink, my beloved! On the morrow let me take thee to thy father's house and

leave thee for fourteen years. Then when the term of mine exile has run its course I shall return to thee. Desist from thy wild decision. Remain in Ayodhya."

"No, my Lord, I am thy shadow. Wherever thou goest thither I go. Whatsoever thou shalt suffer I too shall rejoice to suffer with thee. Spurn me not, O my King."

Just at that moment Lakshmana came to Rama's apartment and unburdened his soul. "O lion-waisted tamer of foes, I must go where Rama goes. Thou art the lamp and flame; I am but the smoke inseparable from thee."

Rama expostulated in vain. Lakshmana and Sita were more unmovable than the Himalayan peaks, and ere the night was out those three had said farewell to Dasaratha, Kausalya, Sumitra, Urmila, and even to Kaikeyi, and mounted the golden chariot drawn by hippogriffs. Sumantra, the bravest charioteer, whimpered and sobbed softly as he held the reins at his seat. He knew and had loved Rama from babyhood. He loved Lakshmana as much, and for Sita his heart was more grieved than for the battle-bearing, austere, wound-enduring youths. He moaned: "This is no chariot but a hearse that I drive away. I carry all the hopes and joys of Ayodhya like a corpse, O prince."

"Sumantra," admonished Rama, "do not make the way harsher by weeping. It breaks my heart to see you weep, friend and master. I must not fail to do that which no ancestor of mine ever failed to do, none gave a promise

that he failed to keep. Look! No, do not look behind—the whole city is far off now. Day is breaking. Drive on, we stop first at the home of Guhaka the hunter where we shall spend a day or two."

Sumantra lashed the hippogriffs in anger, pain and sorrow. They leaped forward like a curse from the lips of a priest—two black streaks against the daybreak sky.

SUMANTRA'S RETURN

THE charioteer did not fly on his return to Ayodhya, for his horses were heart-sick for Rama and since his own heart was heavier than theirs he cared not how they plodded their way back to the capital. Alas, it was not a living city but a graveyard of loves and hopes that he found. After traversing its desolate streets he left his chariot at the stables and walked to the wing of Kausalya where lay and grieved the stricken King, who when he saw the charioteer begged for news of Rama. Sumantra

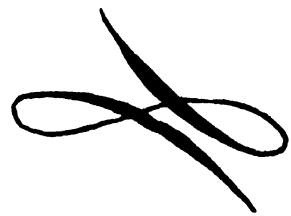
told all, but the King said, "Repeat what thou hast told already," and he repeated twice what he had suffered and seen.

"After a week at the house of his friend the hunter, King Guhaka, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana asked me to take them to Prayaga (Allahabad). There they changed their royal dresses for garments made from the bark of trees. Sita parted with her ornaments and the two youths from all signs and insignia of their birth and breed, and finally put the gummy sap from a tree in their hair making it look matted and sticky. Thus shorn of every beauty they slowly forded the river and vanished into the southern woods. But before he left Rama said to me, 'Salute my father, dear Sumantra. Tell him I go forth to prove myself worthy of our blood. Ask my mother to treat Bharata as her own and never speak a harsh word to the pawn of fate, Queen Kaikeyi. Inform the citizens of Ayodhya that after my years of exile are over I shall return to be their friend and King. Farewell, incomparable charioteer. Farewell, and oh, forget not to salute my mother for me."

With tears stabbing and torturing his words Sumantra repeated the sequel too. "Then I turned my horses. But those ever-obedient steeds, they looked back at the other shore of the river, hoofed the earth with anger and shrilly neighed, hoping to reach Rama's hearing. Alas, the noble prince was lost to sight and gave no sign that he heard

the cry of my beasts. They waited hours hoping that Rama would return and drive back to you, my King.

"Reluctantly we plodded home, three melted into one by grief. What did I see on the road? O tiger amongst men, your capital is but a funeral procession it seems. The whole kingdom widowed of Rama is a cheerless thing. The trees on the roadside have folded their leaves, and their fruits have lost their lustre. On all lies an unseen blight. Wild beasts come near men and cows, but harm them no more. Sorrowing for Rama the tigers have hidden their stripes; the lions have forsaken roaring. As I passed I looked back and saw men, women and children, all the citizens of Ayodhya, who beheld my chariot returning empty; instead of sobbing they were touching the wheels and asking, 'Where is Rama?' " For the tears that were choking Sumantra he could not finish his story. "Rama, Rama, Rama," he repeated as a dumb man repeats one sound through which he expresses everything. "Rama, Rama," cried Dasaratha too in the bitterness of his grief.



THE CURSE ON DASARATHA

THREE days and nights Dasaratha wailed for Rama, Sita and Lakshmana. Kausalya who lamented with him was more undone than he. At last through exhaustion she fell asleep during the last watch of the fourth night, but hardly had she slept an hour when she heard the King calling, "Awake, O Kausalya, that I may tell thee what I see."

"I am wide awake, my Lord, speak."

"Hear then, O most patient of women. I feel my end is at hand. The physicians tell us that at death's door a man remembers everything, now I recall the curse that a

grieving parent put upon me when I was a youth unwed and uninitiated in life.

"One night I went to hunt elephants in the depth of a jungle. I chose by the light of the moon the drinking place of animals, a soundless shallow spring. I ambushed myself behind a tree and watched. Alas, that fateful night no animal came to the spring. As the hand of dawn opened the emerald doors of dawn, I who needed rest fell asleep as a child. Suddenly a noise roused me. I listened as intently as a panther who creeps before leaping. Again the sound came. The jungle was so thick that I could not see any beast moving: no red tongue licking the silver drops; no black trunk sucking in the water. For fear that my quarry would elude me, the third time I heard the sound I shot the arrow—Savda Vedi, the sound-piercer. The arrow flew more silently than vipers in the grass. Then, suddenly, the jungle was rent by human wailing: the cry not of a beast but of a man whom I had wounded fatally. I ran to his aid. Lo, there he lay pierced by my arrow, in his death agony. With great effort he said to me, 'I came hither to fill my pitcher, and you shot me. I am poor, I live with my aged parents in a hut half a mile away, I take care of them for they are old and decrepit and they both live in midnight darkness for they are both irrevocably blind. Carry me to my parents, I wish to see them ere I die.'

"Alas, he died on the way. I dragged him to his parents'

hut. The sightless ones when they heard me coming cried, 'Son, we are thirsty. Give us the cool water. What dost thou drag along so—is the pitcher that thou bearest too heavy? Speak, son, speak.' Not the son then, but I his murderer spoke. O Kausalya, I behold the whole scene again as if thou and I were witnessing it in our midst. I broke the fateful news to the blind parents of the boy. After I had finished speaking they felt the boy's corpse for their hands were their eyes. Amid loud lamentations rose the father's voice who cursed me. He cursed in the name of God saying, 'As thou hast done so shall be done unto thee. Thou too shall lose thy son—and that loss will kill thee.'

"Listen, Kausalya, the soul of patience. I feel that curse is fulfilled. Rama is gone. Now I go to the world of the shades. I already hear the invisible voices calling," and with these words the heart of the King broke and he fell dead at Kausalya's feet. Dasaratha died paying in full for the evil deed of his youth. Whatever Karma, deed, a man does, it will follow him from life to life. Good deeds follow a soul as evil actions do, even to the very Heaven where a soul seeks refuge, and no man can change the results of his deeds, be he a beggar or a prince.

BHARATA'S DECISION

AT the death of Dasaratha runners were sent to Bharata at his uncle's home. Hardly had the week passed when Bharata with Satrughna entered their own city. Alas, it was more sorrowful than a battlefield after the battle, for pity rises in men's hearts at the sight of the dead but in the deserted roads of a town, the doors of whose houses are barred and shut like the cells of sin, there is no healing for the soul. The silence that brooded over Ayodhya pierced Bharata and Satrughna as if it were a thing of steel. Though they had heard of Rama's exile and of Dasaratha's death they never dreamt of the legacy of sorrow that had been left behind. Bharata said to Satrughna as they neared their home, "Cruel, how cruel the silence of the people. They grieve for Rama, but they know not that I share their sorrow. I too love Rama if not more at least

as much as these, these and these." After pointing at the groups of still tomb-like mansions Bharata entered the royal quarters of the city.

But he did not go to his mother Kaikeyi's wing. Instead he went to Kausalya in whose chamber lay the embalmed body of the King. She told him how Dasaratha died and also of Rama's exile. "But," answered Bharata, "to what pass my own mother's misdeeds have brought my father, brother and Ayodhya, that flower of cities. But I promise you this. I will not ascend the throne. A curse upon any man who takes the place of Rama, my brother, my sovereign, my solace in life." Those noble words of Bharata made Kausalya weep afresh. She put her face near his and kissed his brow: "Thou speakest like Rama, I hear the ring of Rama's love in thy voice full of bow-strings."

As Bharata entered Kaikeyi's chamber he beheld that wicked queen and her hunchback maid with garlands, precious stones and holy water for anointing him the liege lord and the sovereign of Ayodhya. "What mockery this, mother!" he demanded, his voice the groan of a cracked gong. Kaikeyi was so shocked with surprise that the flowers and the gems fell from her hands and her eyes were unable to bear the gaze of Bharata.

"I love Rama more than kingdom, throne and crown. Begone, thou hunchback fiend. Flee from my presence ere my sword strikes thee despite my regard for a woman,"

cried Bharata. Manthara ran shrieking and wailing as if she was an evil spirit cast out of a human body. Finding his mother alone he upbraided her no more, but said, "Mother, Queen, come with me to Kausalya and withdraw with thine own lips those two boons that thou hast extorted from our father. After thou hast done that we shall perform the funeral rites and go south to the jungle in search of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana. Rama I shall fetch to grace Rama's throne with Sita seated beside him." Kaikeyi obeyed her irate son for in that way alone could she retrieve a fraction of the respect that he had for her since she had acted under the mad and evil promptings of Manthara.

The next day the King's body was cremated. That ceremony of burning the dead has suffered no change in India of today. Since time immemorial their dead have been cremated by the Hindus. This custom is not new in the east.

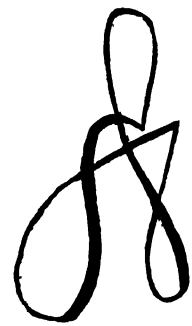
At last when the last flame died down and all had turned into ashes Bharata gathered them in a vessel of gold and poured them into the sacred river, chanting

"Prehi Prehi pathivi purver bhi
Sangamasya pitrivi

Go, go, on the dustless paths of mystery, O Spirit,
Join the Gods and thy fathers who have gone before thee."

After the funeral the poor of the kingdom were fed, all the subjects were granted remission of a year's tax, and all the Brahmins who taught in their tols—schools—were given gifts of cows, rice and garments.

Two days afterwards Bharata made known to the citizens of Ayodhya his decision. His ghoshana (proclamation) ran: "This kingdom and its crown belong to Rama. I love him, the heart-ravisher, as much as you do, so on the morrow I go with an army in search of him. I shall bring him back and celebrate the coronation of Rama as my father and you, his subjects wished. Pray for the success of my enterprise. May the Gods lead me safely to Rama's presence. May I succeed in bringing him back."



THE STORY OF SITA'S BIRTH

IN the meantime Rama with Sita and Lakshmana had gone beyond the valley of the Ganges and reached the hills of Chitrakuta (the Vindhya Mountains). It was a beautiful mountain, in shape like a man crouching in prayer, and its nature was not unkind to those who dwelt upon it.

Chitrakuta was full of hermitages where sages and saints taught boys and girls the art of finding God. But Rama, Sita and Lakshmana shunned hermitages for they were searching for sequestered spots far from human company.

At last they reached the other side of the mountain where ran a pleasant river on whose edge stood a small shelter made of logs. Here they decided to seek hospitality.

In that hermitage lived a saint named Atri and his wife Anasuya. Those two old people had not seen any new human faces for many years, and it gladdened their hearts to behold the noble princes and the beauty of Sita. "This place," counselled Lakshmana, "will shelter us, O incomparable one, until we survey the woods to the southward. Sita who has not seen any woman for many days now will find diversion in the company of the aged wise Anasuya."

"Thou hast spoken wisdom, Lakshmana. Let us abide awhile in this none too crowded place." Rama was indeed glad to see Sita with Anasuya.

Every morning Rama and Lakshmana went hunting. The sage Atri observed silence and prayed to God from sunrise to sunset. If the two princes were surveying what the eyes could see, the saint was penetrating the unseen. If the two royal youths made their way into the mortal woods of the south, the sage was entering the secret of immortal truth in the jungle of meditation.

Sita and Anasuya kept house for those three men, and sometimes explored the forest of the neighbourhood. They studied the herons that made their nest, they watched the kingfisher rob the blue water of silver fish, and the parrots that now and then flew away at their coming like an

arras of emerald blown by the wind. Tigers flashed their gold as they passed by, and elephants saluted Sita by lifting their trunks. Leopards watched her like their own cubs and lions walked at a distance like dogs grown discreet with wisdom and care.

Sometimes she and Anasuya sat by the river and looked into it for that was their only mirror. And there were times when they wandered, solitary, each meditating and keeping silence like a sacred trust.

One day as they sat on the river bank Anasuya asked Sita, "Princess, soul of purity, you the very core of beauty, how came you to have such an unassuming name as Sita? It means born at a plough's point; a thing grown from the earth. How came you by that name?" Sita answered, "My father, Janaka, was childless, but one day he prayed to God for a child. He prayed so fervently that his cry reached the hearing of the Lord. That night he was granted a good dream. In it he was urged to till the soil.

"So he yoked a dozen oxen and set to ploughing the vast fields of his domain with deep determination to till it all with his own hands. It took him a long time. But at the year's end one day tired and weary as he goaded the beasts before him he said, 'If there is God I shall receive an answer to my prayer.' But no answer came. Toward sundown when all the land was dark he felt the earth move under him. He heard the spaces rustle like the gar-

ments of a girl at her bridal. His eyes saw nothing but a gloom wrought with threads of gold. Then he felt the dark earth radiant as a thousand sunsets kissed his brow. Ere the kiss was imprinted, lo, he heard a child cry at the point of his plough. The oxen almost stampeded, terrified by the tiny voice. Then my father bent like a twig under a gust of wind and took me in his arms. He cried again and again, 'Born on the plough's point, thou jewel from the womb of the earth.' After me was born one more child, Urmila my sister, the bride of my brother-in-law Lakshmana."

BHARATA'S QUEST

WHEN Bharata guided by Sumantra the charioteer reached Guha's domain of hunters the latter was suspicious. He thought that Bharata having deprived Rama of his kingdom was now going south to kill him. For that, reasoned Guha, would enable Bharata to rule Ayodhya for his lifetime. He made all kinds of plans to save his friend Rama from death, in fact he was on the verge of planning the assassination of Bharata. But when he saw Rama's brother and his sad face the hunter King was frightened. "What means it, O Prince, you look as one bereft of all graces?"

"Ah, Guha, Ayodhya is bereft of Rama. Our father died of his separation from Rama.. I do not wish to be King, I seek Rama in order to restore to him his kingdom."

"But did your mother not seek the crown and throne for you?"

"Guha, ask no more questions. Help me to find Rama. Lead me where abides that diadem of peace with that pinnacle of womanhood Sita, and that soul of attachment Lakshmana. I seek to make restitution for the error of my mother, Queen Kaikeyi."

Guha blew his trumpet. The horn and the hunter's tune borne by fleet-fair echoes reached his huntsmen in the remotest woods. They relayed back their answer from horn to horn till Guha heard their trumpetings and explained, "O Bharata, my men and spies are on the march. On the morrow we shall go to Chitrakuta."

After crossing the river at Prayaga (Allahabad) the next day Bharata, Satrughna, Sumantra and a large number of soldiers and hunters too, enlightened by swift-moving spies moved toward Chitrakuta. Within ten days' march they found the hermitage of Atri. What pen can describe the meeting of the brothers like deities at the banquet hall of Alaka (Paradise)? What poet dares to describe the sorrow of Rama when he heard of the death of the aged King! He marvelled at Bharata's returning the kingdom to himself. At last the crown that was snatched away from his hands at the eve of his coronation was given to him. Under the canopy of trees, on the emerald floor of the jungle, by the hymning of bird-voices, and the silver

sounds of the river Rama lifted the crown. His hands trembled. His breath came faster and faster. His eyes seeing hardly anything—that crown—he placed on Bharata's head. "What is this? Why do you return the crown?" clamoured his three brothers with Guha and Sumantra. Only one person understood Rama's motive. It was Sita, but she uttered not a sound.

"Is it madness or mockery that you do not accept your lawful crown?" asked Bharata, hurt to the core of his being.

"Grieve not, dear brother," said Rama, "our father's word of honour must be kept by thyself and by me. I must be exiled for fourteen years, and thou must rule. If thou dost not aid me the word that our father gave cannot be fulfilled. So ascend thou the throne of Ayodhya while I spend the years in the woods. We must be true to our father who is dead."

That broke Bharata's heart. Tears poured from his eyes. Kind-hearted Rama sorrowed with him. He knew what a heavy burden had been laid by Queen Kaikeyi on her own son. Alas, if she had only known in time!

Now Guha spoke, Sumantra followed suit; all begged, "King Dasaratha is dead. His word died with him. Come, Rama, dispel sorrow from Ayodhya, gladden thy mother Kausalya's heart, return to thy duty of a King."

Bharata, who next to Sita understood Rama the best,

said, "It is vain to plead with the Himalaya to shed its snow. It is vain to ask a cow not to give milk. It is vain to ask justice to be fickle as sin. I know my Rama; he will do only the righteous thing. Ah me, there is no escape for me."

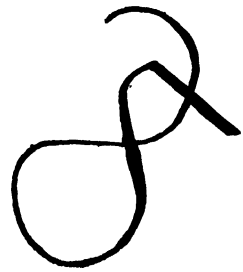
"There is no escape for any soul from the jaws of duty until death shows him the secret passage of immortal life. Go now, hero-son of a hero-father, rule his realm with love, pity and benign deeds. Fourteen years will pass as fourteen beats of an eagle's wings. Go now to Ayodhya, console our three mothers, comfort them. Salute them with equal reverence, yes, with equal reverence and love."

"If I must return to Ayodhya I shall do that in thy name, Rama," proclaimed Bharata with force. "I will not ascend the throne, that is a promise I gave to my own soul. But I am willing to rule the kingdom as thy deputy. Give me an insignia, a symbol that I can place on thy throne." All those present said, "Sadhu, sadhu, well spoken, sweetly said." Rama pondered awhile and said with laughter in his eyes, "A headstrong family ours—severely addicted to promising."

"I know what I seek," exclaimed Bharata. "Give me thy sandals. Those I shall place on thy throne. They shall stay there until thy home-coming. I shall rule as thy deputy."

"Well-spoken, O soul of worth. Well-spoken, thou sap of sincerity!" murmured the assembled people.

On the morrow ere the sun smote down the walls of night, ere the bird-voices stormed the citadel of morn's silence, Bharata placed Rama's sandals on his head and commenced his homeward journey. He crossed hills and rivers, then recrossing to Prayaga he stayed a few days with Guha, the ruler of the huntsmen. At last when he reached Ayodhya his heart was smitten with a pang. "O God, give me strength to live these fourteen years without Rama."



DANDAKA FOREST AND SURPANAKHA

FROM Chitrakuta the royal exiles went further south. They traversed forests untold, and skirted mountains high as heaven and coloured like a parrot's back. By the time winter came they had made their home in the Dandaka forest (modern Kingdom of Mysore).

There where the Caveri river flows they built themselves huts and garnered provisions for the cold weather. Though it is very cold there the place suffered then as it does now from the invasion of migrating animals. In spring animals go north through this district and in the autumn south.

Rama and Lakshmana knew the dangerous habits of the migrating beasts. In order to protect Sita from rude shocks of sudden attacks, they decided to take turns in keeping awake night after night. Like an assassin in the dark tigers leaped at them, and sometimes panthers jumped from the boughs of overhanging trees upon their roofs. Rama slew tigers and leopards almost every day. A wild boar that attacked Sita while coming home from the river, Lakshmana, who was near by, pinned to the earth with his javelin. Once a wild eagle crazed with hunger fell upon Sita. The wretched bird knew not the power of Rama's archery. As he was about to bury his beak in her eyes, an arrow from her lord's bow put an end to the savage thing.

At last spring came drawing the ferocious animals northwards. That brought peace to the countryside. Now Sal blossoms drenched the air with perfumes, the bees hummed over the waters and rifled the lotuses of honey, the Krauncha (herons) flew shouldering the sky, and at night the Doel (the Indian nightingale) wrought witchery with his singing. Though its song robbed all of sleep, yet none felt fatigued, even a shy fawn felt vigorous as a bison in the morning. In the plenitude of spring the Caveri stretched her waters from bank to bank. The waters were still through their fulness, and over them bumbled the black and golden bees. There was no lotus without its bee and no bee that did not ache with singing. Thus in heart-

ravishing Dandaka, Rama, the heart-ravisher, spent the first spring of his exile.

But ere that season of rapture was over the demons of the family of the demon king, Ravana of Lanka, invaded the forests. They devoured beasts and birds, even flowers and insects they did not spare. During the day they slept, but at night, in whose darkness they could see, they attacked and ate the sleeping beasts. Again either Rama or Lakshmana had to stay awake with arms ready to repel the attack of the fiends.

The chief of these Rakshasas demons were Khara, Dusana and Surpanakha. The last named was the witch-sister of Ravana. These three and their followers had leaped over the Indian Ocean from Ceylon in order to play in Dandaka in the spring.

One day Rama was bathing in the Caveri. Surpanakha saw him. His muscles wiry and hard as bow-strings, his skin glinting the sunlight, his face the very image of perfection was just then lifted in prayer to the God of Light. Rama prayed "Ye te pantha Savito purvyaso—O Sun, traverse thine ancient path of dustless mystery to the presence of God. Stand thou suppliant before His golden throne and speak for me—Ravsha cha na adhi cha bruhideva to Him."

Rama's voice deep as a base drum befitting his manly bearing caught Surpanakha's fancy like a doe in a trap.

Hardly had Rama come out of the water when through witchcraft she, assuming the shape of a beautiful nymph, besought his favour. "I love thee, thou sun-dimming, moon-shaming youth. Please love me. The love that I feel for

thee is a flame that can turn this whole forest into cinder." Rama said humorously, "Instead of a cinder I prefer to remain Rama. Go thy way. I dwell here with Sita my wife." But Surpanakha, untutored in the morals and manners of men, answered, "That is nothing. I can wring thy wife's neck and free thee to love only me!"

"O thou very heart of folly, dost thou not know, I love Sita so that I will hurl thee with the sun and the very

heavens into everlasting perdition for breathing a threat against her name? Begone! Anyone who seeks to harm Sita shall taste death. If my arms grow weak there is Lakshmana whose fierceness even the storm-god would not dare meet. Begone!" He strode away, like an elephant, with slow majesty.

But Surpanakha whose vanity was wounded set a trap for him. She sought first to seduce Lakshmana who had no wife, then to kill Rama. One day while Lakshmana was roaming aimlessly in the jungle she approached him disguised as a helpless woman lost in the wilds. But Lakshmana whose mind was keen knew that she needed no help. He scorned her advances and left her as a saint leaves the presence of sin.

Day after day Surpanakha pursued him and each time he repulsed her proffer of sin. One day during the April drought when Rama had gone off hunting Surpanakha attacked Sita. She knew not that Lakshmana was near by. Sita cried for help. That instant Lakshmana shot his arrow at the Rakshasi. The latter abandoned her human form and leaped like a sky-stinging flame. There was no doubt of her identity any more. He pursued her with arrows till they cut off her nose and ears, and she fled away shrieking.

Alas, the mischief was done. Khara and Dusana, those two male Rakshasas, and their followers fell on the young warrior like locusts on a ripening grain-field. He, the swift-

shanked one, ran hither and yon pouring arrows like a rain of death from his twanging bow. The arrows eagle-like shrieked in the air and wherever they struck they stopped not till the enemy's vitals were hit. The battle grew so thick that the roof of heaven was covered by a canopy of arrows, and the noonday became black as midnight. Yet the monsters still came on though Rakshasa upon Rakshasa lay dead or dying.

They pressed nearer and nearer. They made ready to rush upon the hero and the terror-seized Sita. With earth-rending yell they charged like black bulls swift as spinning discs. Alas, poor Lakshmana, his quiver was running empty. "O Rama, where art thou, come, come and save me from the disgrace of losing thy Sita to these fiends," he cried above the thunder of the onrushing Rakshasas. He called and called again: the third time he cried he heard a sound. It was the whistle of Rama's arrows like a flight of sea-birds taking the monsters from behind. The surge of those arrows deluged the fiends. Hundreds of Rakshasas fell. The princes' arrows pierced some from two directions at once, and wrung from them their last breath; others were pierced as drum skins by the knife of a boy. Soon no sound arose any more from the yelling Rakshasas for they were all lying dead and over them leaped and hurried Rama like a lion over slaughtered sheep. He took Sita in his arms to erase the marks of fear

from her brow, then to Lakshmana spoke words of praise as a ruler to another king.

Now that they had rid Dandaka of all the demon Rakshasas they felt safe in their dwelling. But alas, mortal as they were they had not counted on one sinister thing. Surpanakha, the humiliated female, had not entered the fray. She had returned to Lanka to tell Ravana of the defeat and destruction of his fiends. And for the surest proof of her story she could show him her noseless face. "Behold, O King, they have not only slain noble Rakshasas our kith and kin; they have also cut off thy sister's nose as if it were a parrot's beak."

RAVANA,
THE KING OF LANKA

CENTURIES before the ten-headed Rakshasa Ravana had become king of Lanka, the island belonged to an ancient line of Titans who grew so powerful that they laid siege to the highest Heaven. This angered the Supreme Being Vishnu exceedingly. Seeing the gods captured by the Titans He let fall upon the latter his Chakra—disc. That disc possessed of perpetual energy spun round and round and cut off their heads. A handful only were saved who dove into the Indian seas where no Chakra could reach. There the fallen Titans found refuge and peace in the ocean's unfathomable solitude.

Ages passed while the Titan chief Sumali fumed and

Parain

VISRAVA SAW ONE DAY
A NYMPH
RISE FROM THE FOAM
OF THE OCEAN

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fretted under the waters and devised many futile plans for retrieving Lanka from the deities whose present King was Visrava, an exceedingly beautiful youth. He was so fond of the seven arts that he gave up the old science of warfare. All his subjects shared with him his cult of the arts and named their ruler, the Seven Swords of Beauty. But Visrava saw one day a nymph rise from the foam of the ocean. Poor wretch, he did not know that she was Nikassa, the daughter of the Titan Sumali, who had risen above the waters at the instigation of her father to seduce Lanka's king. Sumali had said, "I am growing old, too old even for a Titan. I shall soon die. Since I cannot reconquer Lanka go thou, Nikassa, and conquer it for my descendants. Charm Visrava by thy beauty, for a sense of beauty is his only weakness. Make him wed thee and thy children will become Lanka's lawful kings." Saying these words the aged monster died. To fulfill her father's last wish Nikassa put on the pearls of the ocean bed, strings of coral, and moon-stones that the moon makes in daytime in the caverns of the sea. She wore purple enchantment for dress and on her face she put the magic of deceit. As she trod the iridescent waves at dawn the King Visrava thought she was a nymph from Paradise. She moved towards him and beauty spread a sapphire path wherever she trod. Even a divinity can be deceived. So was Visrava.

He made Nikassa his wife and in time she gave birth

to two monsters, Ravana and Kumbha Karna. But as if the Titan strain had run its course their third child was a small celestial whom they named Bivisana, the righteous and divine, and last of all was born a beautiful daughter, her mother's very image—Surpanakha—and like her devoid of sweetness as all Titan women must be. On Nikassa's death their father abandoned earth and returned to Heaven and Ravana ascended the throne of Lanka. He bade the Titans return from their exile in the sea and made them his vassals and chieftains. But Ravana and his two brothers did not stop there. They began to practice harsh religious austerity which was no doubt an inheritance from their father. Only the celestial in any man inspires him to love religion and practice its hard teachings. The Creator was so pleased to see their spiritual zeal that he said, "Ask any boon and I will grant it." "Make us immortal," begged Ravana, but the Lord said, "That which is born must die. Hadst thou and thy brothers avoided birth I could have saved thee from death. Ask something else, O zealous Ravana."

"Make me ruler of the heavens too," requested the monster, "give me ten heads to think with and twenty arms for fighting."

"So be it," said the Supreme. Then Kumbha Karna, the second one, begged "I wish to sleep without dying." "But too much sleep is as good as death," explained the

Almighty. "I am willing to wake if for waking I am made immortal for one day." "That one day no one can kill thee," granted the Lord, "but how to regulate thy sleep?" Kumbha Karna answered, "One day in six months if it pleases your Omnipotence."

"It shall balance itself thus," announced the Eternal Spirit. "If someone somehow rouses Kumbha Karna before the half year then he mortal shall be. Take heed, do not wake until thou hast slept one hundred and eighty-two and a half days each time. If thou art roused even a moment too early I shall revoke my gift of immortality, and any mortal shall be able to slay thee."

"So be it!" ejaculated the Titan already falling asleep.

Now the Lord faced the third brother, "What is thy wish?" Bivisana answered, "May I serve God in any form at any time."

"Thy boon is granted. Besides, O noble Bivisana, I, God, will be born in human form shortly and shall prove thy sincerity." Hardly had the soul-ravishing music of God's words died away when the Lord vanished from sight, and the three brothers descended to the streets of Lanka. Kumbha Karna stepped along groggy with sleep.

Six months later when Kumbha Karna rose from his sleep Ravana taking advantage of his immortality declared war on the celestials. Kumbha Karna, the immortal, helped him. Together they extended their dominion up to the foot

of the highest Heaven and made Indra and his brothers slaves. From that day on the deities served the monsters of Lanka. The terrible Rakshasas now toiled not, nor reaped. The gods did all the work while they, though not divine, ate and drank with freedom hitherto unsurpassed by gods, demi-gods and fiends.

SURPANAKHA RETURNS TO LANKA

LANKA the capital of the island of Ceylon was turned into a city of magnificence through the toil of the gods who swept its marble streets, polished its porphyry curbs, and turned its street lamps into torches of sunrise. The celestial slaved on and on. Even sinful tasks such as accompanying the army of Ravana when it went out stealing women from far-off places they did. That humiliated the gods most terribly. Ravana imprisoned in his harem the most beautiful damsels despite their weeping and protests. Thus the Rakshasa King became the symbol of terror and irreligion to all creatures human and divine. He seemed to do evil by habit, if he wished to do good he lacked the needful energy. Once he formed a good resolution, saying, "I will build a stairway to Heaven. That will enable every-

one to climb with mortal feet into the immortal paradise." Alas, after the foundation had been laid and the masons had begun to work he lost interest and the stairs of Heaven remained unbuilt: So strong were his habits that he had formed by doing evil that he could do no good.

Such was Ravana. His bad traits dominated him every time. When he saw his sister's mutilated face he was fully aroused. In a whining voice she told him of Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana, the three mortals that had done her harm. Surpanakha's tale was full of guile and exaggeration.

"But why did they cut off thy nose?" demanded Ravana, "What didst thou do?"

"I asked Rama to marry me. He answered that he loved Sita his wife. And he loved his wife so that in order to please her he had to disfigure my face."

"Is that the strictest truth?" demanded Ravana.

"Yes," whimpered Surpanakha.

"Is Sita beautiful?" questioned the demon king.

"Indeed," retorted Surpanakha, cut to the quick. "She is more beautiful than thy favourite queen Mandodori."

"What sayest thou?" thundered Ravana through ten mouths. "More beautiful than Mandodori! There is no such woman in the sky or on earth."

"Thou hast not seen Sita yet. Mandodori pales before her as a star when the moon arises."

Ravana said in anger, "Begone. I shall see with mine own

eyes." Thus dismissing his sister in a rude manner he sent for two winged horses and harnessed the aerial chariot of the gods which he had taken from them at their defeat. Ascending the chariot he flew up into the air. The sun set as the hoofs of his horses struck the hills of Heaven. The sparks that flew from their feet were ribands of garnet streaming down the horizon. Soon leaping over the rampart of night their hoofs struck and "unnested" some stars from their nest in the sky. On and on the chariot rolled, drawn by milk-white stallions whose wings soon fanned the fire of sunrise.

Now Ravana looked down and beheld by a white pool, in Dandaka, Sita seated in meditation and intoning her prayer. No man nor demon was ever before vouchsafed such a vision. What he saw filled him with adoration and awe. In solemn hush he turned his horses. As if afraid to come near the still air that hung around Sita he gently drove away. Headed for Lanka the horses like mammoths hewn ou' of ruby, flung forward their legs, chests, necks foaming with sun-gold.

RAVANA'S EVIL DESIGN

NOW the ten-necked demon fretted in Lanka, for he was smitten with Sita's beauty. He sometimes roamed the streets of his capital as one possessed. He issued forth from his own house without any ceremony and walked on the marble sidewalks of Lanka. He wandered through the city parks where Rakshasas played strange musical instruments. Fountains sang as wonder-clad demons of all sizes and shapes took the air. But Ravana saw and heard nothing. He was stricken and held by the image of Sita. The gold terraces of many palace gardens, their windows of ivory lattice-work and the singing of innumerable celestial birds, could not dispel the gloom that had descended on

him. Art and philosophy could not wean him away from his fatal desire for Sita.

Unable to bear it any longer he said to himself, "I have a right to avenge the wrong done to my sister. Because Rama and his brother destroyed Surpanakha's face I shall chastise them by robbing them of Sita."

No sooner had he thought that evil thought than he acted upon it. He took with him a demon named Maricha and again set forth in the aerial chariot. Its winged horses swiftly carried him toward the forest of Dandaka, and as they went the Rakshasa Raja talked with Maricha of his plan of stealing Rama's wife. They discussed all ways and plans. At last when they were reaching their journey's end Ravana said with finality, "Do as I bid thee. After we tether the horses to the base of Nilgiri (Blue Mountains) transform thyself into a spotless golden deer. Let thine antlers be of the same precious ore. Having taken that form by enchantment wander near the cottage of Rama. I am sure when Sita sees thee she will covet thee. Then if she sends her husband or Lakshmana to chase thee run away exactly as I have commanded. Follow each instruction as thou wouldst follow thine own thought; for if thou fail thou shalt be at once destroyed."

Day after day in the form of a golden stag Maricha romped about Rama's cottage. No eyes ever saw such a beast. He was gold from hoof to the tip of his antlers.

Even in the heat of the day he took no rest, appearing in the green jungle at noon like gold coming out of a furnace of emerald. And at sunset, the blazing light shining on him seemed to wash him with purple waters.

Who could resist such a ravishing creature? So one afternoon as she saw him leap into sight from behind a Sal tree Sita said to Rama, "Catch that deer for me, my Lord. Give it to me for a playmate."

Rama answered, "It is impossible that it is real. No such golden deer, Sita, have men ever seen before. Covet not this beast. I feel a strange foreboding that this creature if we are not wary, may do us harm."

But when calamity is near even the keenest minds are deceived. Janaka's daughter begged, "O Rama, go forth to hunt it. Bring to me that impossible unreal creature dead or alive. Living it will be my pet, dead its skin will be my prize."

Seeing that she would turn a deaf ear to his pleading, Rama made ready for the hunt. Before setting out he enjoined Lakshmana, "Keep close watch on Janaka's spoilt darling. O brother, leave not her side until I return. Promise that you will guard her."

Lakshmana vowed, "I will take care of Sita even to the least gasp of my last breath."

After embracing Sita and his devoted brother Rama ran in pursuit of the deer. The Rakshasa seeing him in hot pur-

suit acted as he had been instructed by his chief. He led Rama far away from the cottage, round and round deep in jungle depths he sped, till the man pursuing lost all sense of direction. Rama knew now that he was lost in the woods. If he allowed the golden apparition to lead him further he would never find his way back. He decided to abandon the hope of trapping Maricha alive. He must either slay him at once or give up the chase in order to return to Sita. To save time he took good aim and fired the arrow "Edge of God." It spun through the air, pierced Maricha and pinned him to the floor of the woods. Instantly he resumed his Rakshasa shape and wailed as he had been instructed in the voice of Rama himself, "Come, Lakshmana. Come to my rescue, the deer is goring me. Come to me, O Lakshmana."

When Rama heard his own voice issuing out of the fiend's mouth he sought to silence him with another arrow, but ere "Sabdabhedi"—the sound piercer—left his bowstring, Maricha had repeated his cry and shaken all the echoes with it. "Come to me, Lakshmana, come."

Fearing that Lakshmana would obey that deceitful call for help, and leave the side of Sita, Rama hastened homeward. But the jungle gloom made him feel his way like a blind man. Through the intricate thickets after slaying many elephants and tigers he found a path leading out of the woods. Hardly had he gone a hundred paces on it when he met Lakshmana coming towards him like a stallion un-

fettered. Beholding him running at such a pace Rama exclaimed, "The air is full of dire forebodings. O Sita, what sinister forces hast thou unloosed by thy desire for the golden beast." Lakshmana cried, "O Rama, thou art safe! But why then didst thou cry out so loudly for help?"

"Speak at length, dear Lakshmana," answered Rama, "while we hasten back to Sita the crown of womanhood."

"When she heard your cry for help repeated a hundred times by the echoes she urged me to run to your rescue, but I answered that my duty lay at her side. Enraged by my repeating these words she cried, 'Thou flyest not to save Rama because thou dost covet me. If he dies thou hopest to possess me.' Thrice she hurled that insult at me which dug into me like a sharp goad. Swiftly I put a spell around the cottage and ran in the direction of thy cry."

"Thou hast acted to the best of thine insight," said Rama, "but, O Sita," he thought, "why didst thou use such words? Into the evil maze of fate, my bride, thou seemest to enter. All is dark and obscure before me." Now turning to Lakshmana Rama exclaimed, "I seem to hold a thread of truth that leads to the purpose for which thou and I have been born. Why do I feel this strange sense of purpose entering into my life? Why am I filled also with the utmost misgiving?"

Without another word the princes hastened on as best they could. Each was silent like tigers stalking a prey.

Lakshmana was still chafing under the insults poured on him by Sita, and resentful toward her. And Rama was suspecting that some evil had come upon her and was stricken with anxiety for her safety. In the younger brother the serpent of pride raised its head while in the heart of the elder pity battled with fear.

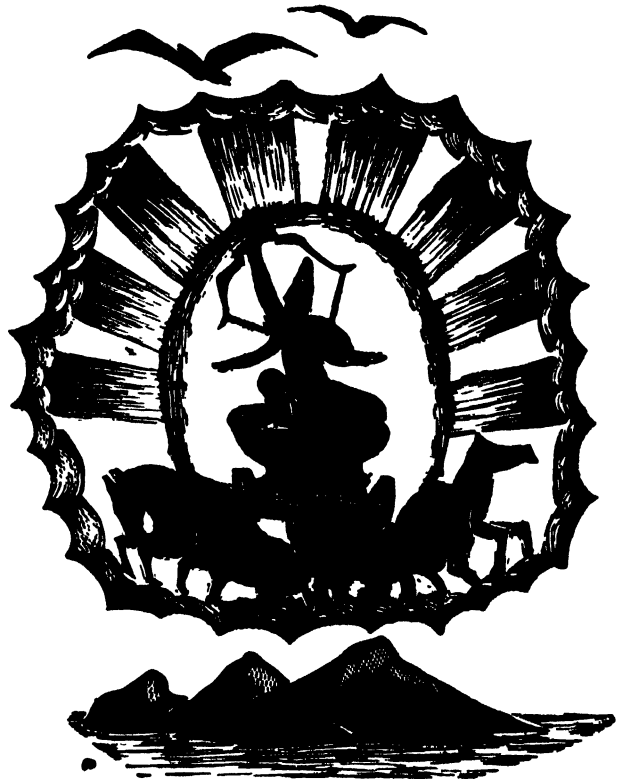
When at last they reached the cottage an hour before sundown they found no Sita there. They shouted, clapped hands and made signs of other kinds but fate vouchsafed no response though their hearts were breaking. On the river-bank there was no sign of her. Near the lotus pool there was no sign of her. In the nearby Kadamba bower no mark of her coming! "Where, where art thou, Janaka's daughter?" wailed the two youths. "Nowhere, nowhere, nowhere," the air seemed to whisper in reply. "Nowhere, nowhere, nowhere," the trees and the creepers whispered each time they shed a leaf.

"Is she kidnapped?" Rama asked.

"How could she be?" answered Lakshmana, "I put a spell around our cottage. Nothing could come within thirty feet of it. Unless Sita went beyond it none could penetrate the enchanted circle and put hand on her."

"Sita, speak. Where art thou? Speak, my beloved." To Rama's continued cry only silence answered, even the echoes were weary with grief, and night, unable to bear their cries and hopeless searchings, put forth the moon. In

thick clusters she hung the sky with stars. With silver softness the world was hung. At last worn and exhausted the two brothers fell asleep.



SEARCH OF SITA

BUT Rama almost insane with grief slept most restlessly. He moaned and sobbed as he lay on the floor of the hut. At each rustle of the wind he jumped to his feet. He listened intently saying, "There she returns. Listen, brother, listen." Soon his mind became so engrossed in hearing sounds that the stealthy step of a panther, or a stag's wild dash for life—each he construed as Sita's coming. And a buffalo's death-bellow under the tiger's deafening roar he thought was Sita calling for help. Lakshmana had to hold

him by force in order to prevent him from rushing into certain death at night. All night long the elder prince acted like one out of his mind which tortured the younger brother's patience.

At last the day broke and both of them set out to search for Sita. The blow of calamity that had dazed their minds suddenly made them keen-eyed like eagles, and alert as the very self of cunning. Beyond Lakshmana's ring of charm, they noticed there were marks of violence on the ground as if someone had dragged Sita by her hair. They followed the marks wherever they led. After a few feet there were no signs on the earth save the print of a giant's foot. That puzzled the princes exceedingly. "How can a man's foot suddenly change into that of a giant?" asked Lakshmana.

"Follow the foot-prints, brother," begged Rama, "no matter where."

Even so they ended soon at a place where were marks of horses' hoofs and the track of a chariot. Suddenly the traces of both hoofs and wheels disappeared. Only a sinister stillness lay about that spot. Lo, there was not the sigh of the wind, not the lifting of a twig to point the way whither the horses and chariot had taken Rama's beloved.

A renewed spell of madness seized Rama's brain. He went to the Tamala tree and cried, "Knowest thou where Sita has gone? Speak, O king of trees! Thou speakest not, soul of insolence that thou art, and for this at death thou

shalt enter hell." Then he went to the Champaka that was pouring down blossoms and perfume to intoxicate the heart. "O fountain of sweetness, tell me where hides Sita to test my love? In this game of hide and seek I am beaten, now point out to me my love's hiding place." But alas, that tree too made no response. Incensed at its hardness Rama said, "A curse on all trees. Now I shall question the vines and creepers of this forest. O ye that wind your charms, tell me the secret of Sita. Why has she left me in this state? Speak, trumpet your tale, mistress of the forest." Vine after vine he addressed; but none gave him any answer, for which he cursed them too again and again.

In his wandering Rama came upon a cleared spot on whose green grass lay Sita's bracelet. The sight of that ornament restored sanity to his brain. "Behold, Sita's ornament! Where is she? . . . Thus far we have traced her, brother Lakshmana, let us push on farther yet."

Hardly had they gone a thousand paces when they heard the piercing call of a being in great distress. They hurried through thorn bushes whose thorns were large as spears. Now and then cutting down creepers thick as an elephant's waist they pushed in the direction of that voice. At last after leaping over innumerable crags and rivulets, bleeding and bruised, they stumbled upon a giant bird wallowing in a pool of blood. It was repeating "Mara-Rama, Rama-Mara," in a heart-rending wail.

"Why dost thou take my name?" demanded Rama.

"I am Jatayu, thy father's friend," answered the bird.

"A friend of my father's shall have the protection of my arm and the love of my heart." Rama said further, "What brought thee to such a pass? Why dost thou suffer so?"

"I sought to save Sita from the demon, Ravana."

"Sita, didst thou say?" screamed Rama. "Speak, thou overlord of the sky."

"Sita was carried off on his aerial chariot by the Rakshasa King Ravana. She called for help. I who knew thy father in our youth have never denied succour to any woman in trouble. So I came down, wings outspread like naked swords, and beak grim as the jaws of death. In an instant I smote Ravana so hard that his bow fell from his hand with his quiver. And as I smote him I heard thy wife say 'Tell Rama Ravana has taken me. Fly to him, O compeller of speed.' Then Ravana shouted 'I am Ravana the King of Lanka; if there is skill in me thou shalt fall here dead as a viper killed, Thou shalt never fly to Rama to tell him anything.' Then he drew his sword. I flew far above him. His two winged beasts caught up with me. I wheeled away, afar. But his horses followed. Again they caught up to me as an eagle catches a dove. I swooped down under them like a fox between a tiger's feet, but those horses turned about as I was vaulting up and away. Now suddenly Ravana's sword cut my wing. Still I fought with my talons.

Parin

SITA
WAS CARRIED OFF
ON HIS AERIAL
CHARIOT

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With my beak I caught this pearl necklace from Sita which she gave me for thee. Now, Rama, go southwards, reach the Indian Ocean, cross it and rescue thy bride from Lanka's fiends. Take this pearl necklace as an earnest of the truth that I am telling thee." Then kissing Rama's feet as a sacramental act the wounded vulture breathed his last. Now his spirit rose from his body in a straight line to the abode of the gods. He who dies fighting for the weak, defeated or victorious, goes to Heaven be he bird, man, or beast.

The Ratnamala, the pearl garland from Sita's neck, gave the princes certainty. But with certainty came a desperate sense of haste. They were tortured by their fancies. They imagined many horrors that Sita might be enduring as the task of cremating Jatayu's body engaged their hands and minds for a while. It delayed them since the funeral had to be done properly. Now in order to do it with every just rite the princes banished all thoughts of Sita from their minds and concentrated themselves upon the prayers, hymns and right thoughts without which no good accrues to the soul of the dead. This change of thought, though very brief, refreshed the two princes. They felt completely relieved in mind and body when they resumed their search after Sita.

THE MONKEYS OF KISHKINDHA

ACTING according to the late Jatayu's advice the royal youths pushed southwards. But wherever they went they could find no further trace of Sita. No more ornaments or other tokens had she left behind anywhere. Rama made a superhuman effort to control his grief for he could not afford to indulge it now that he knew of Sita's fate. He must work and not grieve.

After scaling the southern mountains they reached Kishkindha—border of Modern Mysore. Its peaks rose like spears of sapphire, its flanks were drenched with rainbows, while around it clamoured and danced thousand-throated cataracts. Behind it set the sun, a desolation of amber, purple and topaz. Against the sunset sky leaping from peak to peak like a tawny eagle an enormous monkey came down

towards the two princes. Seeing that near-man approach them they held themselves ready to hurl an arrow or offer friendliness, depending on the tree-dweller's own intention. Fortunately it was a noble one. He had come to them as helper.

"I am Hanuman, nick-named Pavananandan," said he, "son of the wind-god. I caught this azure veil flung by a woman from an aerial chariot. She screamed out a prayer 'I beg you to show it to the two royal youths.' Since your bearing indicates to my monkey's eyes your lineage I present you with the veil."

"Sita's scarf," exclaimed the two brothers in one voice. Rama taking it tenderly from the monkey thanked the latter. With tears in his eyes said, "It is to thee I owe a mountain-heavy debt of gratitude. For days we have wandered looking for some sign of my wife. A Rakshasa named Ravana has stolen her and flown away on an aerial chariot."

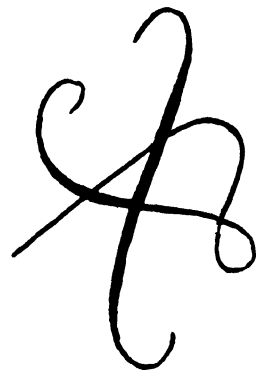
"Now I understand why she screamed. If we had only known we could have leaped up and stopped that chariot in mid-air and carried out an act of rescue worthy of our mettle," announced Hanumana.

"Who are you? What do ye here? Tell us of your errand," asked Lakshmana.

"Besides myself there are two monkeys, Sugriva, known as the son of the sun-god, and Jambuban, the master of wisdom and all learning. Crownless Sugriva is our leader.

But we two, Jambuban and I, have remained faithful to our chief. We have accompanied him in his exile in these woods. Though robbed of his dominion by his brother, King Sugriva has not lost his sense of hospitality and his excellent elegance. Through me he asks you to be his guests for the night, that is my errand."

Lakshmana accepted the monkey king's offer. With courtesy and reserve Hanumana led them. Accompanied by him they reached Sugriva's presence ere the beacon of day had been blown out by the blackness of night.



SUGRIVA TELLS HIS STORY

INSTEAD of one night the princes stayed several days in the company of the monkeys for the reason which will soon be disclosed.

Sugriva, or the lovely-throated ape, was graciousness itself. While Jambuban was full of knowledge, he looked droll with his bear's head on a monkey's body. It was he who advised Rama to tarry longer with Sugriva, counselling him thus, "If thou wilt help Sugriva to win back his kingdom from Vali, his brother, he will then help thee to rescue thy queen from Ravana the king of fiends. Thou knowest

not whither he bore her. Thou need must command thousands of searchers to scour the four directions of the earth. Those Sugriva will command if he reconquers his dominion. Thou alone hast the skill to aid him. By thy help he will conquer Vali. Then all the monkey troops of his kingdom who now toil under his brother shall be thine. These troops led by thee will conquer Ravana. In order to rescue Sita, first help Sugriva our King to regain his kingdom."

Sugriva himself begged Rama one morning, "Thou art a man. In my hour of destitution thy superior Soul and human cunning can help me. My kingdom of Kishkindha with your help I can certainly win back. After ten years of lawful reign I was robbed of my throne and alas, of my wife too by my brother Vali."

Rama who had lost his own wife recently was deeply moved at Sugriva's speech. "Most unrighteous!" exclaimed Lakshmana.

"Thou who art the lion of righteousness will help me to regain my lawful crown?" prayed the monkey monarch.

"We pledge thee our arms and a life-long friendship," Rama responded.

The three monkeys were thrilled. They announced with gratitude, "Then command us. Our friendship will be your sandals, our devotion your shield, our life your lance and our souls your quiver of arrows. We shall live and die, if need be, to restore to you your lost Sita."

Rama whose actions always reflected his words urged Sugriva to give battle to Vali at once. For good comes of timely action and evil of delaying without plan. So on the morrow they set out for Kishkindha the capital of the kingdom bearing the same name. Borne on the backs of monkeys they leaped a thousand furlongs in an hour. Though it was about nine in the morning they found Vali fast asleep in his palace. They scaled its red stone walls and its mansions of brick and wood. At the pleasure garden near the royal chambers after depositing Rama and Lakshmana, the three monkeys stood at Vali's door and shouted their challenge to him. The two men hid behind a vast tamarisk tree and watched the antics of the apes. Seeing the vast bronze door open Hanuman and Jambuban repeated their challenging shout. Hardly had the echoes caught up the noise when like an ebony tusker of towering stature leaped forward Vali. Hanuman and Jambuban he brushed aside and faced his brother as a Himalayan peak addresses a cloud.

"I am ready, brother Sugriva, I heard thy challenge. I accept thy cry for battle. It is a long time since I had an equal to fight. Come, let me crack thy skull as a little ape the shell of a walnut."

"Thy head it is that shall crack," retorted Sugriva, "humiliation shall be thy food from now on. Give battle, fool." He fell upon Vali as a lion on the horns of a bull.

A wail of sorrow rose from the throats of Vali's many wives in the interior of his home. Rama and Lakshmana understood by their pitch that the monkey women were afraid their husband would be killed.

In the raging battle, drowning all other clamours by their roars, the two monkeys smote each other with vehemence. Their breath rose as black smoke, they spat out comets of fire; and the sounds of their scratches and bites were a veritable thunderstorm. The tide of battle rose and fell. Now Sugriva stood on Vali, then the usurper on top of Sugriva. Thus they fought again and again till the palace walls crumbled at the impact of their bodies and the pleasure garden became a quagmire of sweat and mud. The sun passed the meridian. Still they fought, body bruising body, breath scorching breath: two monkeys become one image of hatred, they were rolled together like a mammoth python. Then from the rolling mass rose a gory figure. It was Vali bleeding profusely. He tried to throttle Sugriva who groaned and cried for help from Rama. Like a prayer answered ere it is spoken his cry brought its reward. Rama leaping forth from his hiding place shouted as he hurled his javelin, "Vajradanta"—the tusks of a thunderbolt. It spun through the air quicker than two beats of a heart and felled Vali to the ground. The fallen King groaned and screamed in great pain "I am slain unfairly."

Now Sugriva rose to his feet and bent over his dying

Pavan

RAMA
LEAPING FORTH
FROM HIS HIDING PLACE
HURLED HIS JAVELIN

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brother as might a storm-bent tamarisk above a fallen rock. But soon between him and Vali flew shrieking the grief-stricken Tara, Vali's first and most beloved queen. And when her touch had told her hand and heart what had befallen her lord she stood erect and faced him, her lord's slayer, Rama. "Why, why hast thou smitten him without warning? Behold thy weapen entered his back first. Its point has come through his chest. Coward's trick this, and from a man, one who prides himself upon his righteousness and superiority to every monkey. Shame on all men. A curse upon thee, the wounded heart of a woman curses thee."

This curse stung Rama as if it were a mortal arrow. "Avert, O avert thy curse, I beg thee. I shot my arrow to help Sugriva, so that he in return may help me to rescue my lost wife, Sita."

"Too late," sighed Tara, relenting, "the curse spoken by a wounded heart never misses its aim. Thou shalt recover thy queen, but not enjoy her. O pity, O pain!" Then she sat down, took her dead husband's head upon her lap and mourned for him seven days.

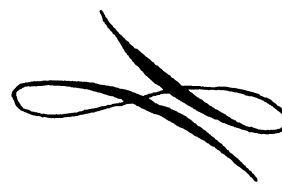
Those seven days Rama's heart dwelt in a hornet's nest. "Why did I not give fair warning to Vali? What possessed me to hurl the Vajradanta on his back? O Sita, where art thou? Thou alone canst heal my heart from this terrible poison of remorse; thou alone hast the touch that will heal me of my wretched state."

Lakshmana tried to console him, but his heart was not in his words. He did everything to ease his brother's pain but his own conscience kept repeating within him, "Since thou didst attack without giving fair warning, thou must wash away the sin of thine action with the waters of regret." He suffered as much as Rama, for he felt himself part of that unkingly act. He was humiliated beyond describing that he and Rama had done what neither man nor ape would do. Then he blamed himself thus, "Hadst thou but endured Sita's hard words, hadst thou stayed by her in that hut in Dandaka in spite of every insult all this could have been prevented. It is thyself, Lakshmana, it is thy wounded pride that should be blamed."

But time tempers all things, even these two brothers' regrets. Besides Sugriva's coronation, the exacting of solemn promise from all to see Angada, Vali's son, proclaimed heir-apparent, and other details of the state occupied Rama and Lakshmana. They hardly had time enough to think of themselves. They had Sugriva openly avow at his coronation that he and his two human friends in order to undo the wrong they had done Vali thought fit that his son Angada be made the lawful crown prince of Kishkindha. Moreover Tara, his mother, was persuaded to wed Sugriva and be his queen. This she did later after years of mourning.

As if the end of all endeavours had come Sugriva pro-

claimed a royal holiday for a month the day after his coronation. All the monkeys save Tara, Hanuman and Angada took part in the merrymaking. Hanuman with Angada joined Rama and Lakshmana to spend the time in prayers in a nearby hermitage. Thither Jambuban followed them a fortnight later grunting bear-fashion, "The kingdom is perishing through too much happiness. Everyone is so merry that he knows not what he is merry about. O Rama, at the end of this miserable month of pleasure let us set out in the quest of Sita. The monkeys will need some hard and cruel piece of work to do if they are to be purified from their present revelry. Let me pray and meditate with you, for my soul needs to be purged from the happiness of the past two weeks. Excessive pleasure is not good either for men or for monkeys."



THE MONKEYS GO IN QUEST OF SITA

AT the end of the month Rama held a conference with Sugriva. He told that monarch to bestir himself. "Do not squander our precious days in making merry, O King of Nearmen." Sugriva said, "One more month of fun will do us good." But the wise Jambuban, the newly created Councillor of State, objected: "O majesty of Kishkindha, we pledged Rama our life and limbs only half a dozen weeks ago. I beseech and pray that we send armies of monkeys in quest of Sita's whereabouts. Thou thyself canst stay at home and continue the courtship of the widow of Vali, but the other monkeys should not be allowed another month of weakening joy." Sugriva pondered a while, then

asked the Crown Prince Angada's opinion. Being the youngest he should have spoken first, for the youngest's judgments if spoken last are tainted by the opinion of his elders. Following that ancient rule the heir-apparent bespoke his mind. "I prefer to lead an expedition, your majesty, I do not wish to loiter here any longer. I wish to test my muscles and my talent for leadership." "Sadhu, good Sadhu," exclaimed all present. Then Hanuman remarked "The young prince is right. I will go with him whithersoever he leads."

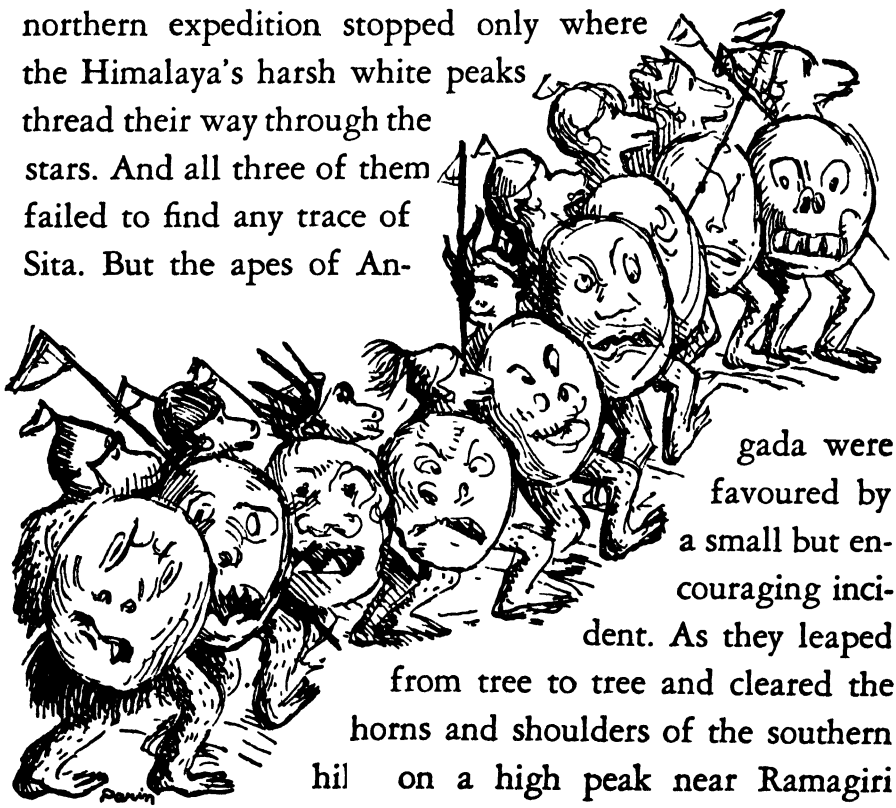
Now the King himself spoke, "Friend Rama and brother Lakshmana, you have performed your part of the bargain. It behooves me to carry out the part that is mine. On the morrow Angada with 'the son of the storm deity' will go south with ten thousand apes. They will examine every needle-point of ground, and I hope they will return with Sita; but if not with her at least with trustworthy news of her. Give Hanuman a ring or some token to show her when he locates your bride."

Armed therefore with Rama's ring the heroic Hanuman with Angada went to the outer forts to gather around themselves ten thousand monkeys. Next went forth Jambuban with orders to send out an equal number of nearmen to scour the east, west and north for a trace of Sita.

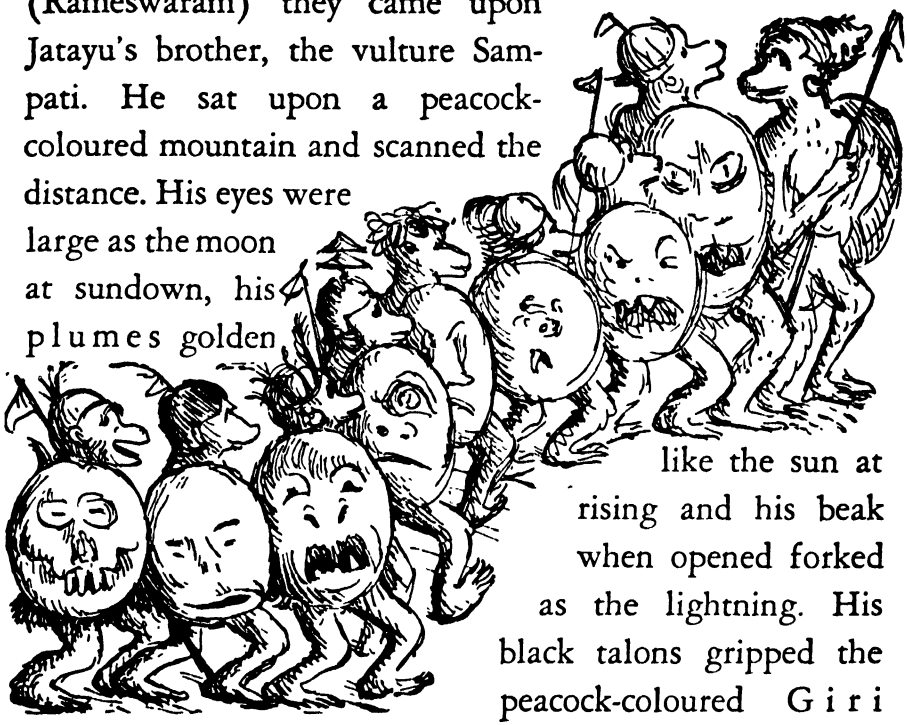
On the morrow with the rising sun four expeditions set out in four directions. They leaped into the air shading the

earth from the god of light. The whole world seemed plunged into midnight gloom. But fortunately even such clouds pass. With the vanishing of the monkey-clouds the day-god shone upon tree, streams, and fields. Rama and Lakshmana retraced their steps to the hermitage to spend the coming rainy season in thought and prayer.

Before the rains had begun all the four armies had reached the parts of the earth they had set out for. The western expedition arrived at the Arabian sea, the eastward bound monkeys came to the Bay of Bengal, while the northern expedition stopped only where the Himalaya's harsh white peaks thread their way through the stars. And all three of them failed to find any trace of Sita. But the apes of Angada were favoured by a small but encouraging incident. As they leaped from tree to tree and cleared the horns and shoulders of the southern hil on a high peak near Ramagiri



(Rameswaram) they came upon Jatayu's brother, the vulture Sampati. He sat upon a peacock-coloured mountain and scanned the distance. His eyes were large as the moon at sundown, his plumes golden like the sun at rising and his beak when opened forked as the lightning. His black talons gripped the peacock-coloured Giri (peak) as a tiger's jaw bites the neck of a bull.



When he saw the apes come swarming through the sky like giant locusts he flung a clanging challenge in their teeth. Angada and Hanuman when they heard that entrail-freezing clangour coming from Sampati were struck if not with terror at least with deep awe. They shouted in answer, "We seek Sita, Rama's bride." . . . "Approach, friends," cried then the bird.

Lo, monkey after monkey fell around him and did obeisance as vassals to their chief. Last of all landed Angada and Hanuman giving him the salute of equals.

"Friends," greeted them the bird of mammoth shape, "what news of Rama?" They filled his ear with tidings that pleased the very marrow-bone of his spirit. Then it was the monkeys asked him questions. Sampati answered, "Ravana's chariot red with my brother Jatayu's gore flew by here sometime ago. In it I saw Sita chained. She cried to me for help, she begged me to unchain and free her from the demon's grip. Then seeing that I did not rise, in order to goad me to action, she told me of Jatayu's death at Ravana's hand. O, the anguish that seized my spirit! My brother's slayer flew by and I could not avenge that foul crime." The vulture shed tears of bitter suffering.

"Why didst thou not fly up and rend the fiend?" asked Angada indignantly.

"Alas, O youth, knowest thou not that the Sun robbed me of my wings?"

"No, we did not know that," chorused all the apes save he, the son of storm. Hanuman said, "I crave thy forgiveness, O Sampati. It is my fault that they know not thy family feud with the Sun-god. I neglected to tell it to them before we set forth. I beg thee to tell us how the jealous Sun robbed thee of thy wings."

"Listen to me, listen, O apes, without much wit. Learn from my own lips of our battle with the Sun.

"In the days of the gods, when only heroes walked the earth, there were also four vultures that roamed and ranged

the air, our parents and two children, Jatayu and Sampati.

"As our parents grew old, the desire of life first grew faint in the heart of the father bird, and he consented to die in the height of his flight. He hovered so near the Sun that he almost flew above the god, when on a sudden, he fell as a stone falls into a deep well. His wings were close against his body, with not even a feather outspread to retard the fall. Down, down, down, he dropped and still further down till the hills were passed, then flocks of small birds, then the green-winged jungles, and he disappeared like a little black leaf in the waters of the sea.

"The mother, beholding in horror that mysterious fall, cried shrilly to her two sons and called them to their nest in the Himalayas.

"When they reached their home that lay in one of the snowy arms of the hills, she dried her tears and bade the children lie still. At sunset the snow-peaks burnt like torches, then all were lost to sight as the stars flung their silence upon the world.

"One day, soon after, Jatayu, my younger brother, flew toward the Sun. Mother cried to me, the elder, to follow her. We flew at a certain distance below so that what she said to me could not reach the ears of the young Sun-invader above.

" 'Sampati,' said my mother, 'promise me to guard

Jatayu after I die—even to the end of thy days. Knowest thou what killed thy father?—It was the Sun. He did not wish anyone to fly higher than himself. Thy father soared almost above his head, and the envious god at once plunged into him his rays of fire.' . . . Suddenly she broke off crying. 'Lo! There is Jatayu too close already to the Sun. . . . Come down, Jatayu. Come down! Wretched boy.'

"But he listened not; so beating her wings with a last effort she flew above that heedless young one. That instant the Sun hurled his fatal arrow of fire. It pierced my mother through the heart. Jatayu saw her fall suddenly, her blood glittering like a stream of ruby against the face of day.

"Jatayu flew after her, but she fell, wings folded against her body, past me who was just below her, past flocks of vultures that began to swoop down after her, past the white hills and the palm trees, down into the yellow and green line where the tawny Ganges throws herself into the arms of her lover, the sea.

"That night in our nest, hemmed in by sorrow, I extracted a promise from Jatayu. I made the younger brother swear that he would never go near the Sun without giving warning of his intention.

"Guarding and educating Jatayu proved almost an impossible task to me. I kept my promise to our mother and never failed to serve the little brother's every need. Jatayu was a soul of fire and the very self of daring. Hardly had

the anniversary of our parents' death passed when he began to plague me for permission to fly to the Sun. As time went on, his requests became more and more frequent, until at last he said:

" 'Thou art jealous of me. Since thou canst not fly to the Sun thyself, thou wouldst fain prevent me from trying my wings.'

"This proved too much for me. I said, 'To-morrow, then, we shall scale the Sun, if thou wilt promise me one thing: first, that I may go with thee.'

"The next morning, long before the day-break, we jumped off the Gauri-Shankar (Everest), where our nest was, and flew upwards. The hills very soon shimmered beneath us, a floor of white marble; and ere it was daylight we had scaled the cold precipices of the moon and were mounting the roofs of the high-born stars.

"Now the Sun rose, and seeing us, two brothers, already so high, began himself to scale the turquoise spaces, with burning haste and fierce pride. The worlds glowed in gold and ruddy light. It was ordained that once humbled by another the Sun would lose his power to kill. The planet Asta Basu rolled like a small glass ball below us. Others, large stars, swam below now. Many stars fled, frightened by the fury of the Sun. Yet still we two rose. By now we passed Brihaspati (Jupiter); we leaped over the Silver Wanderer, the Way of Milk, and now, now . . . Jatayu almost reached

the hills of noon where the very Sun himself was used to tarry a moment for rest. I was flying below him.

"The angry god flew so fast that he shortened the morning into the wink of an eye. Upwards and upwards ran the Sun.

"Ere Jatayu alighted on the highest height, suddenly, I saw an arrow of fire piercing the sky. It was close upon Jatayu. Luckily I was the nearest to it. With a shriek of anger and a heart full of dismay, remembering what my mother had done before, I tumbled and turned, and swifter than the telling, spread out a wing that screened my brother from the blow of the Sun.

"Suddenly, I shook and wheeled and fell with a clanging shriek that smote the heavens like a cracked brass gong hit by a hammer of steel.

"But because I was not taken unaware, as were my parents, I escaped a mortal blow. I lost the use of my wing. By now all further danger was past, for the Sun had been beaten. Now he was shorn of his power to kill. So he hastened and set.

"The world glowed in colour as we two brothers swept downwards and still further down, until the Himalayas that once appeared like hives of bees, now seemed to poise on space as a golden falcon on the wrist of Heaven. Far flocks of vultures that once swarmed below like hungry black flies, now flew crimson-winged with amber feet and ruby beaks. Further down, further yet, we swooped.

"Soon we passed Gauri-Shankar and its lower peaks. Lo, the forests rose like Titans brandishing their spears at us. Lower yet, lower, till men and cattle that from our heights we had never beheld now beset us on every side.

"Oh, to have been cast so low! Those who once dwelt on the crest of Himalaya, now sought shelter where the foxes wander and the jackals shriek at night. But we were happy for we had robbed the Sun of his insolence.

"At last, I fell here on a river bank. At once I plunged my burning body in her cooling stream. Soon the sun-colours faded from the world, the forests throbbed with silences, while the stars rose and flung blackness abroad.

"Though I did not die I could never fly again. Jatayu now learnt from my lips what had befallen our parents and myself one after the other. At last the secret of the Sun was out.

"I have lived here for many centuries and watched the heavens and the woods. It was this habit of mine that enabled me to catch sight of Sita as Ravana drove with her in his chariot to Lanka. Here ends my story, also my life. I have no desire to live any more."

When Sampati had ended his tale he paused for breath. Hanuman said, "Do we fatigue thee, O ruler of the skies?"

"I feel," answered the sky-winger, "that my end is in sight. Ever since Jatayu's death, life has been slipping out

of me. Now if I give thee this information I shall have served Rama to my last breath. And it is prophesied he who dies serving Rama enters Heaven without any more ceremony than a sleeper plunging into dreams. Listen carefully, stop the jabbering of the younger apes. Can you not see that I am speaking with my last breath? Beyond yonder peak lies the sea, and beyond the sea is the island of Lanka. Thither flew Ravana's chariot with Sita. After I die cremate me quickly. Do not waste time on my funeral. Then swiftly leap over that southern hill that burns like a diamond. At its feet the sea is spread and beyond it lies Lanka where dwells the imprisoned Sita."

THE FLIGHT OF HANUMAN

AFTER Sampati's funeral when the apes beheld Rama Giri's shore they could not believe their eyes. All of them save Hanuman had beheld no water save only the tawny rivers and blue lakes.

Now, behold, suddenly before them rose the emerald ramparts of the sea. Battlement upon battlement, foam-crested parapets, distances flagged with opal spindrift smote their souls with wonder. As the green waves hammered the ivory beach the monkeys trembled like children in fright. Awe and terror pierced them as they descended onto the sand and scanned the simple line of the horizon against which the ocean charged. None spoke for a whole day in the presence of that majesty.

After they had become used to the ocean the apes held a council of war on the edge of Rama Giri. Each one quailed before the thought of crossing it. All monkeys fear the water, not that they cannot learn to swim but because the

Indian Ocean is full of sharks, makars, and dragons who find monkeys a most toothsome diet. Fear entered every soul at the thought. Day and night they held council without deciding anything. In the meantime they beheld the July cloud raising its head in the south. That was a signal —the season of rain was at hand. Something must be done before the heavens drew sheets of water like walls of impregnable moonstone between India and Ceylon. Seeing the monkeys wavering, at the first flush of dawn Angada announced, "O citizens of Kishkindha, I beg permission to leap over the ocean. I wish to vindicate the honour of our tribe."

Hanuman who had been silent all the time said, "No, prince, thou are the future ruler and may not risk thy dedicated life. If anyone is to go across it is I."

Angada answered, "I have yet to prove my prowess. Let me scale this fence of jade, I insist."

"Then," said Hanuman, "let us decide it thus." Hanuman explained his plan. "I go first. If I do not return in a week come thou after me. Rama gave me his signet ring, which shows that he intended me to cross the Indian Sea. But I know if those Rakshasas see me they will prevent my return. Thou, prince, may come to rescue me, and I promise to keep alive at least a week. In this manner shalt thou have thy coveted chance and prove thyself brave beyond any doubting. Let me leap across on the morrow."

Ere the Sun's wheels had churned the waters and his fire had smitten the sea into myriad iridescences the ape, sired of the Storm, leaped into the sky. The shore fell under him until it looked flat as an ivory blade. The crags and cliffs that had appeared as the tousled heads of giants now were dwarfed to the size of tasseled larch. At last even the summits of Rama Giri flattened under him into huts of yellow thatch in the dawning light. Still higher rose Hanuman and looked about him. Nothing, nothing before him but the terrible wilderness of water, savage with heads of sharks and dragons that had seen him from afar. They bared their teeth large as swords and smacked their scaly lips. At such a sight shivers ran through the storm-god's son. He swiftly inclined his line of flight to the south, then closed his eyes.

"Land, land, land at any cost," he said to himself, "where I shall not have to see those devouring sea beasts." Before the short morning twilight was over he had gone so far that his comrades could see him no more. When he opened his eyes again he saw the Sun rise on his left like a mountain of gold on whose throat and chest hung the sea, an ornament of scorching beauty.

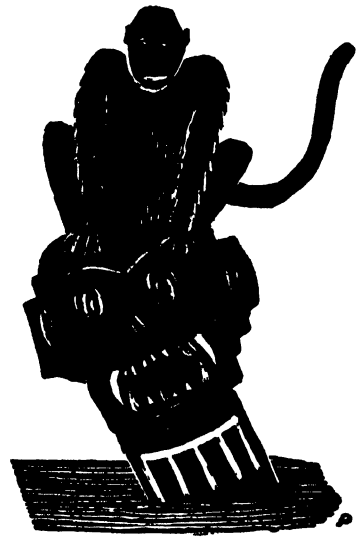
Hour after hour he flew yet there was no sight of Ravana's ravishing city. Alas, his strength was failing him and the sea seemed to draw him as it sprang to the horizon and licked from the sky the red of sunset. Against that terrible witchery he struggled as a bird ere the serpent's eyes

hypnotizes it. Once he almost fell to the sea but the chattering teeth of sharks below steadied him. He shut his eyes and flung upward. At last, after what seemed like a night of blindness he drew his eyelids back into his head and lo, before him rose the diamond towers of Lanka high as Himalaya where day still lingered too reluctant to yield the world to night. With a shout of "Rama, Rama," he plunged forward and as an eagle lands in his eyrie under the shadow of a high hill he softly descended on the sand under the diamond tower, while far away the sea echoed like the sound of a receding dream.

PAUL

BEFORE HIM
ROSE THE DIAMOND TOWERS
OF LANKA
HIGH
AS HIMALAYA

P. 120



HANUMAN IN LANKA

WITH a shiver of pleasure at the thought of his safe arrival Hanuman scrutinized the capital of the monster kingdom. Under a long wall hung the branches of sky-soaring cocopalms whose green, gemmed with the sunset colours, spread like a forest of peacock fans. Above them stretched the walls of Lanka piercing with their turrets and towers the purple clouds in the sky. There between them crouched well-armed Rakshasa sentries as lions crouching between tall reeds.

Before such a sight Hanuman's heart quailed. "How can I reach Sita beyond those sky-piercing walls?" Fortunately he stood in shadow and the watchmen of Ravana saw him not from those great heights whence they looked afar. Soon

the short tropical twilight passed and all the world was wrapped in the black silence of night.

Hanuman was so fatigued that he slept through the entire night without being disturbed by the "surge and thunder of the seas." When he woke in the morning he saw the Sun like a red bull charge through the sapphire forest of water and thrust his horns into the sky. The heavens shed red glory for a while: then all the world was white. But today the glory of the sunrise could not charm him, for Hanuman was hungry, and he, the storm-born, felt as if ten thousand wolves were howling for food within him. "Food, food, food," he heard himself say. He looked up at the coconut trees. Lo, there was food! No sooner seen than done, in one spring he was on the tree-top splitting coconuts open with his knuckles and eating their meat. In half an hour Ravana's city woke up and his sentries hurled spears at Hanuman, but he dodged each sharp weapon as if they were feathers falling slowly.

That enraged the sentries so that they flung at him other weapons besides—arrows, bolts, discs and maces. Instead of taking them seriously the son of storm leaped about briskly and ate coconuts as if he were at a picnic. Now in order to dodge a flying harpoon named serpent-mouth he leaped higher than before and as the fiend's weapon hissed and flashed beneath him, that titanic monkey beheld over the walls of Lanka Amra Kanan—a mango grove, bent

down under the weight of ripe mangoes. The sight drew him like a magnet. Instead of coming down on the coconut tree he swung up and over the walls of Lanka, his tail knocking off a star from the sky which no human eye could see. That mammoth heavenly body fell half way between India and Lanka and made an island in the ocean. But Hanuman never saw the star fall and the seas churn and foam like a vat of boiling water as they received it. He beheld only mangoes. In an instant he had landed in the midst of them and was lost to the Rakshasa watcher's view. Unaware of every danger he sat down to finish his breakfast with the red, yellow, purple and saffron fruits. He ate as a forest fire devours trees. In an hour's time half the mangoes of Lanka were reposing within him, while all the Rakshasa gardeners were chasing him from tree to tree.

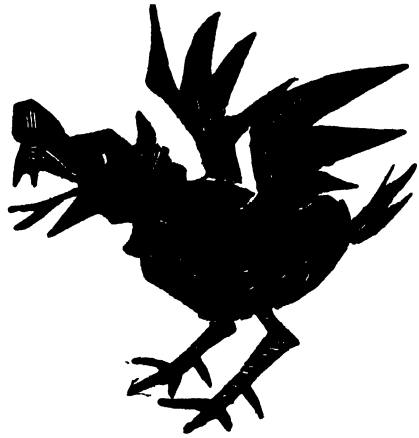
Now that his hunger was appeased Hanuman recalled that he had come to Lanka not to play hide and seek with gardeners but to find Sita. Loath to give up annoying the Rakshasas he leaped out of sight.

"Where can I find her, where shall I seek?" He repeated these words the greater part of the morning. Palaces, grottoes, and pleasure-gardens, everywhere he looked but found no trace of Sita. In Ravana's own vast halls he saw all kinds of monster females but no human soul. On the roofs in the late afternoon where the ladies of Lanka had come to take the air he spied not one that resembled Rama's bride.

"Where is Sita? How to seek her? Where to find Rama's queen?" He spoke to himself without receiving a response from within. At sundown he gave up all hope and decided to spend the night on the steepest tower of the royal palace where no sentry prowled. Though he was worried and anxious he fell asleep like a child.

On the morrow, when he opened his eyes, the vision of dawn-swept Lanka ravished him. Ravana's abode was all gold, the fountains about it were fashioned from crystal and their blue waters fell like the voices of thrushes. Deodars (cedars) fanned the air above the singing fountains. In the courtyards and halls of gold gods still captive dressed in celestial vestures toiled, sweeping and polishing pillars and floors.

Looking away from Ravana's palace he saw the Crown Prince Indrajit's house of amethyst. Its ivory walls were ornamented with topaz and onyx. No matter where he looked, opulent beauty choked his senses. No man nor monkey had ever seen anything like Lanka save in dreams. But even such enchantment could not dull his desire for food. He was hungry again and in a moment's time he was eating the rest of the mangoes of Amra Kanan.



HANUMAN
SEARCHES FOR SITA

A FEW of his divine powers Pavana, the wind-god, was allowed to retain when he was born as Hanuman the monkey. He could still increase or decrease the size of his body. At will he could grow small as a squirrel or big as a mountain. Now while he was feasting in the mango grove he decided to make himself as inconspicuous as possible in order to continue his hitherto unsuccessful search for Sita, and sc he shrank into the size of a very small monkey. Thus he was hidden by the prodigious foliage of Lanka's many trees and had an opportunity to look and listen. At night he crawled soft as a python to palace windows and heard what the Rakshasas said to one another. In the daytime he stayed near the royal household hidden in a tree and listened to the gossip that went on there. High and low he searched but alas, could not find any sign of Sita. She

was not in Ravana's palace, nor could he locate her in one of the many palaces of the demon-king. He sought to find her in the state prison so he crawled thither small as a mouse, but no Sita could he discover. Where then was Rama's beloved wife? Was she still alive?

That question filled his heart with gnawing misgiving. "Has Ravana killed her because she refused to be his wife?" asked Hanuman of himself. "Woe, woe unto me for arriving in Lanka too late," he wailed to himself. "If she be indeed dead I must have certain proof of it." This thought quickened his flagging will and mind. He sat awhile in his fortress of leaves on a tree and meditated. Since all clear conclusions come from meditation Hanuman arrived at a lucid plan soon. "Suppose Sita is alive, the only person to know of her whereabouts is Ravana." He thought further, "I shall therefore follow that monster wherever he goes day and night for some time; eventually I am positive he will wend his way to Sita's dwelling place and I shall thus discover her." He thought as monkeys do, stumbling upon the truth. But monkeys being more prone to action than men he acted swiftly and followed Ravana two days and two nights without food or sleep. As if the privations that he had suffered were the just price, fate now granted him what he was searching. The third day he followed Ravana to the Asoka forest. Ravana drove in his chariot of gold that glided into the emerald woods like the setting Sun

into the green wilderness of the sea. In order to keep up to the vehicle drawn by demon horses who were faster than the wind, Hanuman leapt from trees and towers with great haste. Sometimes he coursed on the ground like a squirrel limbed with the lightning. Ravana drove alone, unaccompanied by his vigilant guard, and so by no art of his own Hanuman escaped detection, since Ravana's ten pairs of eyes were fixed upon his steeds. Thus he failed to notice his pursuer. Soon they reached the heart of the Asoka forest where, guarded by grotesque female demons, the captive Sita dwelt. After tying his horses to a tree Ravana passed through cohorts of terrible grotesques and gained the presence of Sita. Hanuman who had climbed to the top of an Asoka tree at last beheld her. "The very moon fallen from heaven," he said to himself as her beauty charmed his eyes. The ugly guardians who held her captive were as ugly as she was beautiful. Though she was pale, too pale even for pity, the light of purity that shone on her face shamed the Sun. One glance at her human form told the monkey messenger from Rama that he was in the presence of a divine being. Even had his eyes been deceived his ears now heard the truth, for Ravana was speaking through his ten sets of teeth to Sita!

"Sita, if you do not love me, and will not marry me on the morrow I will have thine eyes plucked from thy head." Though he waited for an answer the queen of Rama dis-

dained to reply. "Thy face shall be scratched into the very image of ugliness and then I will send thee back to thy husband Rama. Blind, ugly and terrifying, thou wilt be ruined in his eyes. Take my warning! Renounce Rama. Love me and be my queen."

"I can love you on one condition only," slowly spoke Sita. Those words pierced Hanuman's heart like the swiftest poisoned blades. He repressed a cry of horror with great difficulty. Alert as a tiger for its prey he listened for further words from Sita.

"My condition is that you in your own person become Rama whom alone I worship. In my heart is engraved Rama, in my soul is engraved Rama, in my bones is Rama. In my veins Rama runs. He is my blood, in my brain, in my soul. I can love only that which is within me. Therefore only if you become Rama can you win my love."

Ravana howled with anger. His ten mouths shouted all at once like a tenfold thunderclap. "I am a wizard, I could easily take on the form of Rama, but such tricks I utterly despise. I want to be loved as Ravana."

"Even if the Sun is plucked by a child, even if a lunatic empties the ocean into a cup, even if a rabbit's whimper slays a lion instantly, even if the sky grows like grass under our feet, Sita will not love Ravana. Begone from my presence. Plague me no more. O Rama, where art thou, O Rama, come to my rescue!" Sita wailed, repeating the name of her lord.

Pavin

THE CAPTIVE SITA
GUARDED BY
GROTESQUE DEMONS

P. 129

Though her words flowed out of a heart in torture they sent pangs of gladness through Hanuman's spirit. "I have at last found her. My journey to Lanka has not been in vain," he said within himself.

Ravana now gave some orders to his grotesques and drove off in anger and shame.

With the coming of noon all of Sita's guards went to their dinner and for a long siesta which was the custom of the Rakshasas, as of all peoples who dwell in the south. Slowly through a path between the Asoka trees came a young woman of great beauty bringing Sita her dinner on a platter of gold. She saluted Sita with great humility, "Thou must eat, dear friend, just to keep alive. Thou must not die of starvation before the news of thee reaches Rama."

"O Sarama, my only friend in this serpent's nest. Were it not for thy kindness I would have died long ago. But how can I eat such delicacies when I know not if Rama lives at all."

"Try, beloved lady. Eat a little of the rice with coconut curry, a little of the baked bread if it please thee and the Luddoo (a sweet made out of cheese and almonds). Nourish thyself to give me pleasure, dear friend."

Thus coaxed and cajoled Sarama, the noble wife of Vivisana, Ravana's righteous brother, the wife of Rama ate. But what she ate was so little that Hanuman who was

watching her from above was alarmed. He said to himself, "She can not live long if she pecks at her food like an absent-minded sparrow."

Soon came Surama's maids to escort her back to her palace. Instead of letting one of them carry the plate that she had brought with her Sarama bore it away herself. This she did as a mark of her esteem for Sita. After seeing that no one was guarding Sita and making sure that he himself was not being spied upon, Hanuman came down from his perch, bowed very low before the bride of Rama and said, "Rejoice, Mother," paying her the same homage that men give to God, "I bring you news of your husband."

"Who art thou?" Sita cried in dismay. "Art thou another monster in disguise sent to torture me with tales of Rama?"

"Hush," whispered the monkey, "I am no Rakshasa in disguise. I bring you news of Rama. Fear naught, O pinnacle of purity; do put your trust in me."

"Though thou art no Rakshasa," whispered Sita, "how do I know that thou truly hast brought news of Rama?"

"Look, O incomparable one. Behold, I wear Rama's ring on my hand. Bring thy scrutiny to bear upon it. O Mother, I am but thy son, a slave of Rama, the backbone of truth. Is not that his ring?" Sita took the signet and put it on her finger. The very touch and fit of it unlocked tears from her eyes, blotting out all sight. "Rama, Rama, Rama," that

is all that she could say. Hanuman, the bravest of the monkeys, shared her sorrow and wept with her.

Soon the grotesque guardians of Sita were heard yawning into wakefulness like palm-fronds in the wind. Hanuman swiftly disappeared into a tree. Now that he had found the Asoka forest he decided to dwell there for several days in order to learn from Sita's lips how she was kidnapped and how she could be taken back to her husband.

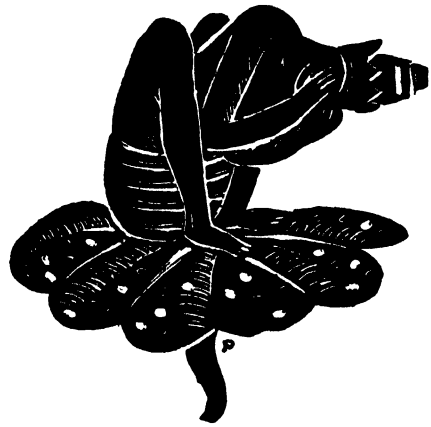
Every day at the appointed hour he beheld Ravana's golden chariot. Every day Ravana came to plead with Sita to give up all thought of Rama. Videha's daughter seldom made reply, but when the monster irritated her most by praising himself to the skies she would answer him thus, indignant and unafraid:

"The bridge of right, the wearer of the garment of truth, Rama—his shoulders are set like mountain sides, his arms are stronger than a thousand tigers' limbs. He will fall and tear thee as the eagle swoops to catch a viper and makes ribbons of its slimy body. Rama's arms like the talons of the thunderbolt would seize and destroy many fiends like thee. Begone, thou ten-headed creeping beast."

"How can Rama slay me when the weapon that destroys Ravana is in the Creator's keeping?" Ravana set to bragging anew.

But Sita cut him short: "Though neither God nor fiend

has power to smite thee down, yet from Rama's hands will leap the weapon that will end thy life of vice and sin. Begone, thou loathing's very soul!" Thus each day Ravana the compeller of the deities was spurned by a woman.



SITA'S TALE

WHENEVER the Rakshasas that watched fell asleep or relaxed their vigilance Hanuman came down from his nest of concealment and listened to Sita's story. She said: "It is myself that I blame, it is myself alone that I curse for sending away my brother Lakshmana to assist Rama that day. Do not fail to tell Rama from me that our brother did as I bade him. Not blame but praise must be given that youth who is devoted to duty as the shores to the sea. Even when he left me at my own bidding he drew a magic circle of protection through which no earthly or celestial foe could reach me. Thus he did all that lay in his power to protect me. But Ravana the demon was more artful that day than all. He came to the edge of the magic circle disguised as a human hermit. He came forward from behind some trees which had hitherto con-

cealed him begging for alms and saying, 'I am a holy man who has lost his way in the jungle. I am foot-weary, travel-sore, hunger-pierced and thirst-tortured. Acquire merit, store up treasures in the hereafter by giving me food and drink.' When I said that I was forbidden to go out of that protecting ring which Lakshmana had drawn about me he said, 'I know who thou art. If Rama and his dutiful brother return and hear that thou hast not given food and drink to a holy man they will surely be accursed. It has been inscribed in the sacred book of law that he who refuses hospitality to any man hungry and thirsty shames his whole family and by that act draws his ancestors down from Heaven and casts them into hell. Wouldst thou bring such a curse upon thy husband and his family?' When he saw me still hesitating he raised his hands in a gesture of cursing and shouted, 'Bring forth rice and water to this side of the magic circle or I shall pronounce a withering curse on thee and thine.' A thousand spectres of fear galloped through my heart. Blinded by them, shorn of all cunning, I hastily gathered some rice in an earthen plate and ran forward. Every step I took my feet seemed to cling to the ground as if mother earth herself—Dharitri—sought to hold me back. But my eyes saw only those two hands lifted in the ominous gesture of malediction. This goaded my spirit and I walked on. Seeing me hesitate on the brink of the magic line of protection he started to intone the

withering curse. Terror-stricken I stepped across and offered him the plate of rice.

"Instantly those two hands dropped and I was caught in the twentyfold coil of a ten-headed python. I screamed and fought with my utmost strength. Alas, to no avail!" Sita wept bitter tears as the memory of that moment rushed upon her. Who but she alone had known the horror of being caught in the twenty arms of a monster emerging out of a human form! The shock and terror of it cannot be told. After she had dried her eyes Sita resumed, "Swiftly he lifted me to the sky where he held me down in an aerial chariot with several hands while with the others he drove towards Lanka. In order to give Rama some sign of what had befallen me I flung away ornaments and my veil hoping that he might come upon them and thus be guided to Lanka."

Then Hanuman told her of those tokens, and of the dying Jatayu the bravest of birds, and how the monkey-folk of Kishkindha had unsealed to Rama what she had feared would remain eternally concealed. She who had banished all hope of rescue from her soul now was kindled again with hope.

"How fares Rama now? Who cares for him?" she questioned, "Who gives him and Lakshmana food and drink? How many monkeys tend to those two, sun and moon on earth?"

HANUMAN'S FAREWELL

WATCHING and listening to Sita for several days Hanuman found out how her days were passed. Every morning she was told that the Rakshasas were going to blind her eyes, cut off her ears, disfigure her face and mutilate her body. But strangely enough they never carried out a single threat. Then the guarding grotesques would stand close to her and shout imprecations and curses. After that they would put on ghastly masks and dance hair-raising fearful dances. And last of all Ravana would come bragging of his own glory. Sometimes he lied saying that Rama and Lakshmana had been killed and devoured by demons.

Sita, the rock of patience, sat still never noticing all the strange antics repeated day after day with variations. One afternoon while the guarding Rakshasas were having their siesta Hanuman asked, "O mother, tell me how you endure these strange beings?"

"I rarely hear or see them, son Hanuman. My soul tells

me that if I notice them it will be my undoing. So I never see, hear, nor taste their deeds or misdeeds. I say to myself, 'Rama, Rama, Rama!' The magic of his name beguiles me so that the cheap sorcery of these demons never touches me. What can their threat to kill me mean to me who am bereft of Rama? How can their threat to blind me terrify me when I am blind already without sight of Rama's face? How can any sound move me when I hear not Rama's footsteps on the path? I endure these Rakshasas and Ravana as a cloud endures hawks and herons. The cloud is silent when they screech or clamour for she is lost in the quest of her lightning-lover. Rama, Rama, Rama, I seek thee within me and my senses are sealed."

"All this shall I tell Rama when I return to him," exclaimed Hanuman.

"You must go to him soon, my son," she continued to Hanuman, "for he is fretting and pining for news of me. Tell him that I am not devoid of friends. Ravana has a brother whose name is Vivisana who is righteous and pure. It is his wife whom you have seen serving me. Sarama and I sit and pray often for Rama and Lakshmana. Inform my lord, the perfection of all qualities, that I am not friendless even in this Lanka of monsters."

"What else shall I tell Rama, O soul of purity?" begged Hanuman again.

"Tell Rama what you have seen. But beg brother Laksh-

mana seven times ten to forgive my rude words. Go to bring both of them hither, O my son, as soon as fate permits."

"Indeed, that we monkeys will do," roared Hanuman, assuming his full size. "Lanka shall fall like a wall of reeds before the inundation of monkeys led by me. Ravana shall yield up the ghost. Then in his aerial chariot thou and Rama shall return to Ayodhya! Farewell, mother, farewell." Taking the dust from her feet Hanuman leaping reached the outer rampart of Lanka and crouched to spring over the sea to India.

In the meantime the grotesques that guarded Sita had been roused by the monkey's roaring. Rising from midday sleep they had given the alarm. Unseen Rakshasa sentries had sprung up ready to guard the gold ramparts of Lanka with spells of wizardry and traps of sorcery. While other monsters set to whet their teeth in order to feast on the corpse of Hanuman. All this was done very swiftly and with the strictest secrecy ere Hanuman had left the Asoka forest.

Now just as Hanuman sprang up in the air to plunge into the sea they cast their nets of blackest magic and caught him. Though his face was towards India his whole weight dragged him down to Lanka. Net after net fell and caught him in their meshes till it seemed to him that every hair of his hide was trapped and held in a vise.

His half-closed eyes dimly saw rows of monsters dancing with joy while their clamours and shouts proclaimed to his ears, "Monkey meat is delicious. Let us roast him for dinner." They twisted his tail grievously.

"I must think fast. Rama's trust, Sita's fate, and the honour of all the monkeys depend on my return to India. I must get back even if I have to burn Lanka. O Rama, give me strength! O Rama, illumine my mind." Thus prayed Hanuman's soul within him.

Instead of Rama he was forced to think of himself. A burning scorching pain shot through his body. Lo, the Rakshasas had set fire to his tail. They yelled "Let him roast inch by inch. A slowly roasted monkey is the most toothsome meat in the world. Let him burn gradually like meat on a fire of chaff."

"Oh, the pain, the pain of it," groaned the trapped monkey. That very instant an idea shot through his head, and action being the nature of monkeys he put it to work at once. He made himself as small as a mouse and crawled through one of the large meshes of the net. Though people pursued him in vast crowds he fled fast setting fire to everything that his tail touched. In a few minutes though he had vanished fire leaped up from dry grass and forest leaves, and the smoke therefrom screened his fleeing body. As soon as he had outdistanced his pursuers he took on his usual size. Now the Rakshasa beheld a flame-eyed angry

monkey vast as a thunder-cloud brandishing his burning tail like a chain of lightning. He applied it to granaries and houses setting them on fire. House after house, granary after granary, gardens, grottos and palaces, in fact half of Lanka was one mass of encircling fire. As his tail came near the Asoka forest just at the point of firing it he suddenly remembered Sita, so instead of setting fire to its most inflammable trees he held his tail aloft burning like a torch in the presence of Videha's daughter. Quickly he told her what had happened. She commanded him to do no more damage. "Now that the Rakshasas are busy fighting fire all over Lanka put out the fire from your tail, my son. Then leap to the sky and go forth to Rama. He awaits news of me. Fly, fly across the sea."

"Give me then a sign, Mother," said Hanuman. "My danger has made me think, and Rama will desire proof that mine eyes have verily beheld thee in the flesh. Please give me something to carry to him."

Sita slipped her wedding ring into his hand while with enormous puffed-out cheeks he blew at his tail. Soon he extinguished the flame. But alas, being a monkey and witless he had brought his face so close to the flame that it was burnt and blackened permanently. Even to this day in the forests of India you can see Hanuman's direct descendants. They are the only monkeys whose faces are black. Had their first forbear kept his visage at a distance

from his burning tail they would not have had to wear dark faces today. As, however, this is a badge of their service to Rama instead of considering it a damaging thing they look upon it as the mark of their nobility, hence all other monkeys envy them their black countenances.

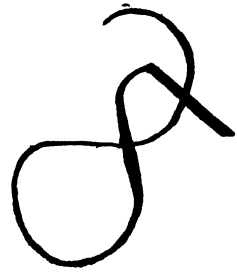
When he turned away from his tail and looked again at Sita she cried, "O my son, Hanuman, what have you done? Your face is black!"

"Never mind my face, mother, it is my heart that is true to you and Rama. Farewell, with your blessings, farewell. I have the ring in my pouch. I will not devour it. Farewell." He swallowed Sita's ring, then sprang to the ramparts of Lanka. Not a soul was there now. All the Rakshasas were busy fighting fire elsewhere. He crouched and then—leaped soaring up like an arrow racing to the heart of Heaven. Below him Lanka looked like a black smudge as he coursed over the sunset-sombre sea. The air was cold and keen as a razor which seemed to sharpen his wits. Hanuman swung forward towards India as he saw "Dhruva," [1] the north star, swing to the horizon where the inky tropical night was lifting its brow.

All night star after star rose to give him guidance. At last the moon rose. In order to acquire merit by serving Rama she flung a silver path to guide Hanuman to Cape Comorin, the southernmost point of India.

[1] For the origin and meaning of "Dhruva" see "My Brother's Face."

When her office was fulfilled the Sun rose. Like a tiger of gold he sprang onto the Eastern hills and revealed to the weary Hanuman's tired eyes the shores of India dotted with thousands of monkeys performing their morning worship. He roared at them as he descended. They knew him by the sound of his voice, but what was it they saw upon his face? They cried to him "Hanuman, Hanuman!" He descended rapidly, "Welcome, welcome," they shouted as he fell before them spent with pain and fatigue. But in that fatigue was a consciousness of peace and victory.



RAMA AWAITS THE RETURNING MONKEYS

IN the meantime the season of rain had reached its climax. Outside of Lanka where the Gods were compelled to keep up a state of perpetual spring, the whole world was in the grip of storm and cloudbursts.

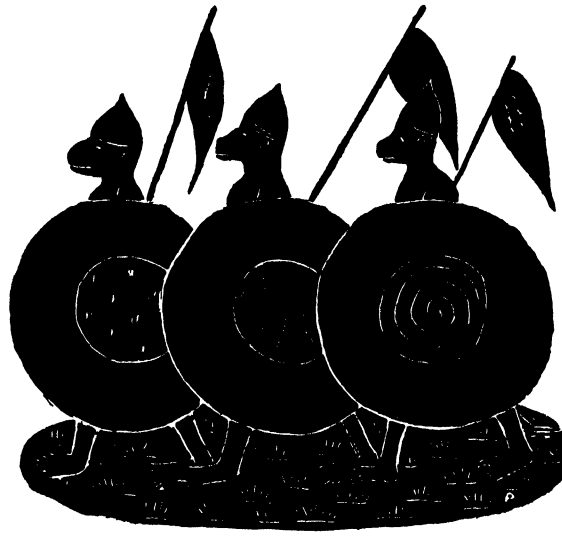
Far off from the land of the Rakshasas, oblivious to all enjoyment, Rama and Lakshmana spent their time near Kishkindha in meditation and conversation. Austere and serene Rama had said to Lakshmana, "We must practice self-purification while we are imprisoned by the rain. Do thou, O devotion-thewed youth, listen to the falling of 'the silver straws from Heaven.' Behold, the sky is beleaguered with serried ranks of clouds. Thunders strike

upon it with livid lashes. The sky groans in pain yet it does not surrender its emerald summits.

"Look at the horizon—there Chakrabakas (swans) along with their mates are tracing a certain path to their homes in the Himalayan lakes. Nearer one hears, when the rain has stopped awhile, the gurgle and groan of waterfalls heightened by the screech of wild peacocks. Cranes are lifting white sails on the green mast of the hills. The earth rain-born and lightning-cleansed appears in her jade mantle shot with gems; seest thou the jeweled flowers in the grass, brother Lakshmana and lo, birds are singing, though they are dripping with the cold rain! The far-off mutter of the thunderbolt is dulled by the sonorous humming of bees and guttural croak of frogs.

"That short interval is passed. Again the rain begins. The clouds have stormed the highest citadel of Heaven. No sun, nor moon, nor stars can be seen. All the directions, north, south, east and west, are as harps strung with strings of rain. Clearly manifest now are the signs of the rainy season. My heart is heavy lest we sink into an abyss of sorrowing, and since our grief is caused by our dire fate, let us meditate to purify our hearts of woe, our thoughts of fear, and our souls of all lassitude."

Thus spent they the season of the rains.



THE MONKEY'S RETURN

ONE night after six weeks of the drumming deluge of the rain Rama and Lakshmana remained awake praying to God. Then suddenly they beheld a silver plough pierce the cloud before them. It dug deep and darkly into the storm until it pierced the heart of the abyss, then on its horns of gold-drenched crystal, lifted the blue sky and held it aloft.

"Behold the risen moon, O Rama," exclaimed Lakshmana. "The season of rain is vanquished!" Rama looked carefully in all directions—north, south, east and west—and snuffed the air. The fragrance of the earth, the utter relaxation of the soil and the profound limpidity of the air told the princes that the season of peace and harvest

was at hand. Now they heard the dawn-bird sing his matchless note of gladness and of calm. Far off as if a giant was pulling the string of a titanic bow Rama heard another sound. Again it came, more distinctly, like the beat of an eagle's wings slowly descending. It grew louder each passing minute till from a sound of silver chord it rose to the clamour of a storm. Lo, in the augmenting light of dawn he beheld Hanuman coming through the sky like a winged mountain. Lighter than a hawk he landed at Rama's feet.

Hanuman, that supremely talented monkey, after telling the extraordinary story of his adventures to the end, showed Rama Sita's bridal ring. The very sight of it like a bolt split Rama's self-control and made him shed a flood of tears.

"Shall I see thee again, O my Sita? How can I live without thee? Canst thou endure the torture of the Rakshasas until I come and put this ring once more upon thy finger? O Sita, if thou canst listen to the cry of my heart, do not give up hope. Pure and unstained as the moon-washed heavens, strong and untroubled as the Himalayan peaks, wait until I come to rescue thee." Then he turned to the monkey. "O my friend, Hanuman, what can I confer on thee to show my gratitude?

"Lacking thee, Sita would be lost forever. Without thee I would become as one without a soul; without thee all of us would be as hollow as a skinless drum. We owe thee

much, O my soul; is there any favour that I can confer on thee? Speak!"

With tear-choked voice Hanuman, the sky-spanner, replied, "My soul is at peace because I have seen you, O tiger amongst men, and Sita, the glory of all womanhood. Having beheld you I ask only to serve you and her, as long as I live!"

"That is granted, my son, for without thy companionship I can not live. But ask something that is for thee alone to have and to enjoy." Hanuman looked about thinking what boon to ask. Lo, he saw his face reflected in a pool nearby and was startled, it was black as charcoal, and he spoke thus to Rama:

"My Lord, it is said divinity resides in you. Whatever you grant, as boon remains true and untouched by the dust of time. Grant me then this, that unlike other monkeys mine own descendants shall be born always white, though black of face, exactly as I look now. The characteristic that I have acquired I want you to make eternal for all my line. I acquired this face in your service than which there is no nobler office in the world. Therefore now say the word that will carry this black mark of honour to my remotest posterity."

Rama pondered awhile. Then seeing in Hanuman's eyes a light of deep determination he said, "So be it," and because Rama said those words, in the jungles of India

today if you wish to distinguish the noble qualities of Hanuman you will find them in the monkeys that wear black faces. They are the aristocrats of the species. Their clan is called Hanuman—Shakhachara—the best of the tree-dwellers.

THE MARCH TO LANKA

AFTER all the monkeys had assembled in Kishkindha under King Sugriva, Rama, Hanuman, Andaga and Lakshmana made inspiring speeches to them and exactly described their coming march to Lanka. Last of all spoke Sugriva, urging them to uphold the honour of the monkey race no matter where or how.

"On the morrow," the King concluded, "we march to Kanya Kumari (Cape Comorin) the southernmost point of India. Now go home and say farewell properly to your families. Report for duty before the first sun-wing rises again above the gloom in the east!"

And the following day just as the eagle of dawn had begun to preen his golden pinions, with the clamour of a

thousand storms the monkeys set out for Lanka. They leaped over many trees with the agility of hawks. They cleared the rolling hills as goats clear broken fences. They drank, bathed, and swam tawny rivers. They passed as locusts spread over autumn fields. Distances vanished under their feet like sugar into the mouth of a child. Rama and Lakshmana were carried on the backs of large monkeys who worked in relays. And ere the first day was done they had covered a twentieth part of their journey.

No sooner had the sun risen and set seven times three than the cohorts of Rama stood like clamorous forests on the edge of Cape Comorin. They roared and shouted so loudly with joy that the "surge and thunder" of the Indian Ocean was drowned as a sparrow's chirp is stilled by the wind whistling in an eagle's wing. There they stood, two men surrounded by untold apes and baboons. Before them mile upon mile unfurled the blue banners of the sea. Wherever they peered the waste of waters stretched into forbidding immensity.

After sunset as soon as the bivouacs had been lighted and all the soldiers had been comfortably settled in their separate camps Rama, Lakshmana, Sugriva, Jambuban, Angada and Hanuman held a council of war. "How to span the ocean?" they questioned one another again and again. Rama said, "We cannot leap over the ocean like thee, Hanuman. Only a few tree-dwellers have thy skill

and strength. There is naught for us to do but to build a bridge."

"A bridge on a vast ocean!" exclaimed Jambuban and Sugriva. But the young, such as Angada and Lakshmana, said, "It will take a long time to make. By the time it is completed Sita and most of us will have grown old and died."

Hanuman cried, "Why do I not leap over to Sita and bring her back on my neck. That will rescue her quickly and save us a long task of bridge-making." Rama smiled at them all and said, "It is not only for Sita's rescue that we have come, but also to put an end to Ravana and his demon-race. Sita is but one woman amongst many who are exposed to attack by the Rakshasas. It is not enough that we rescue her alone. We must destroy all Lanka and free all womanhood from the menace of Ravana. In order to do our task completely we must have a vast army at Lanka's door. Sita must wait until we build a bridge on which our cohorts can cross and annihilate the Rakshasas utterly."

"Sadhoo, well spoken," shouted all his listeners. But Jambuban the bear-headed monkey who was Sugriva's Dewan (prime minister) counselled, "With all the monkeys working every day every hour it will take ten years to build that bridge to Ceylon. Ten years without fighting will undermine the heart of every soldier. Bridge-building will make pacifists of our warriors. O Rama, set not out upon thy plan to span the sea."

A sombre and profound pause followed. As if it were unbearable Sugriva broke the silence. "I have pledged you, O Rama, that we shall rescue Sita for you. But I see no reason why we should toil to free all humanity from the menace of Ravana."

Lakshmana answered, "King Sugriva, it is your head, not your heart that speaks so. Prudence is a dweller in the house of reason, a miserly tenant in a narrow home. But what Rama wishes is the truth. We should slay Ravana. Let us save not only Sita but all womanhood by slaughtering the demon vipers no matter how long it takes."

Then shouted Angada and Hanuman, "Thy words have converted us, O Lakshmana. We are devotees at the shrine of thy truth. Let the bridge be built."

"But ten years of civilian work will dry up the spring of our enthusiasm," reiterated Jambuban. "An army of civilians cannot fight demons. Ferocious soldiers are needed for that."

Another pause more depressing than the previous one followed. The monkeys turned their faces toward Rama. Their instinct told them that he had a noble idea in his mind. That tiger-silencing one spoke softly like a mother to her children:

"The bridge can be built in two years. We may have to besiege Lanka for at least ten years after that."

Sugriva grumbled, "How canst thou say that?"

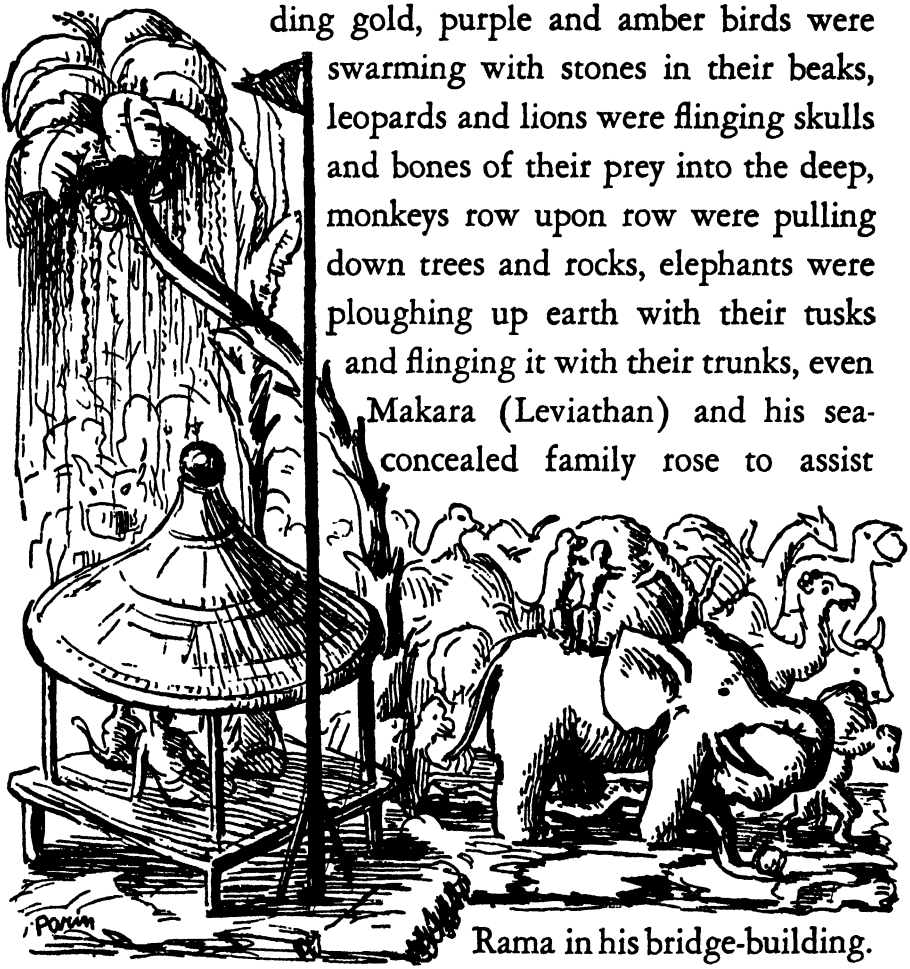
"I have the means by which to do it," rejoined Dasaratha's eldest-born. "Let us rest for the night with perfect peace. On the morrow, friends, we shall commence the building of the bridge."

The force behind Rama's simple words was so great that the meeting broke up without further discussion, and each monkey softly walked away to his camp to bed. Only the two men stayed together. Then, without speaking, Rama signed Lakshmana to meditate.

The two princes folded their legs and sat still praying and meditating. The stars strode across the sky and faded. The giants of the jungle roamed and clamoured while the vast army of tree-dwellers slept. But the two men prayed for the help of Heaven, for the aid of all four-footed beasts, and for the cooperation of birds. They sought also the assistance of the Sun, the moon and the seasons. Each by each the souls of the sleeping birds and beasts answered, "Yes, we will help." The heavenly bodies, too, answered, "We come, Rama, to aid you as you ask." So while the world slept, its waking soul pledged Rama to be his slave. Such is the power that prayer and meditation can create! And because Rama was fighting to save not only his own bride but all humanity the whole universe was glad to espouse his cause.

Thus that memorable night was spent. And long before the red wheel of the Sun had churned the ocean into scud-

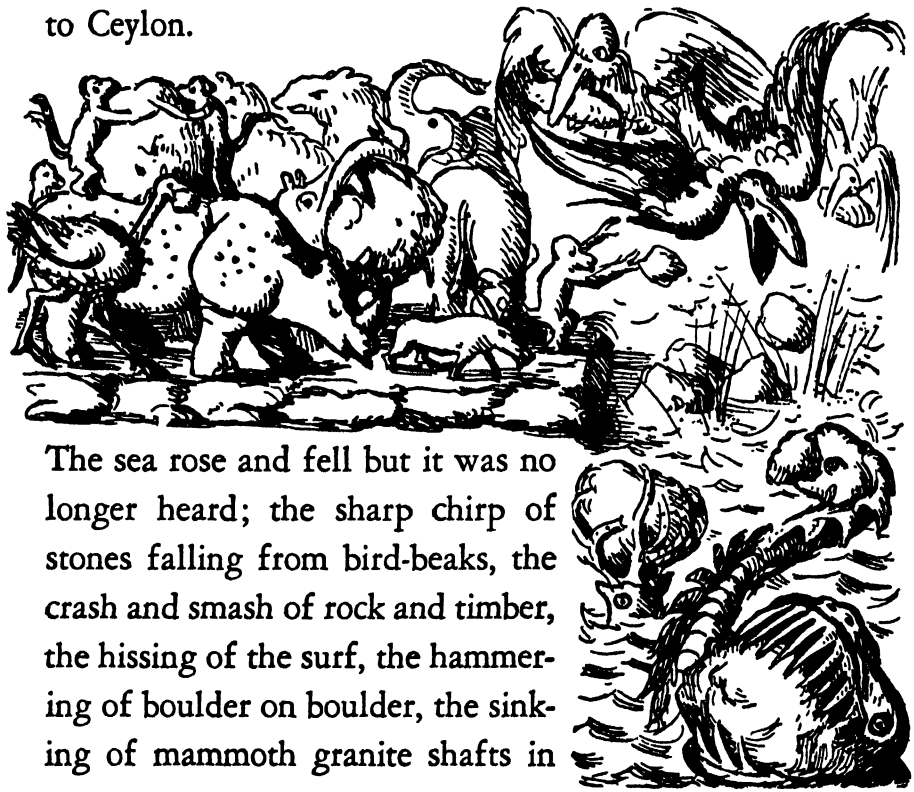
ding gold, purple and amber birds were swarming with stones in their beaks, leopards and lions were flinging skulls and bones of their prey into the deep, monkeys row upon row were pulling down trees and rocks, elephants were ploughing up earth with their tusks and flinging it with their trunks, even Makara (Leviathan) and his sea-concealed family rose to assist



Rama in his bridge-building.

Last of all came the chipmunks. They begged to be of service. Rama with sweet thanks said, "Dip your bodies in the sea, roll yourselves in the sand, then go and shake the sand between the stones that the apes are joining together. Go, make mortar for me." The chipmunks busied themselves at once. Lo, hardly a few minutes passed when their

chief crawled up to Rama's lap and said, "Some monkey flung a rock the wrong way and hit me. O Rama, I am dying." But Rama said, "I will heal you," and he stroked the chipmunk three times with his hand. The previous night's meditation had given Rama so much power that healing passed out of him and made the little beast whole in a trice. But Rama's fingers left their marks on his body so that even now India's chipmunks wear coats of three stripes. Those are the finger marks that their ancestors received at the building of the Rama-setu or Rama-causeway to Ceylon.



The sea rose and fell but it was no longer heard; the sharp chirp of stones falling from bird-beaks, the crash and smash of rock and timber, the hissing of the surf, the hammering of boulder on boulder, the sinking of mammoth granite shafts in

the deep, and the singing of those who worked and enjoyed work because they could sing, drowned all else. Thus toil became a joy, and joy a serenity of the soul.

The day ended and the night was no less like day, for the moon poured effulgence from above in answer to the prayer of Rama. So the beasts of night toiled as had done those of the day. Hammering of stone on stone rang louder than the storm smiting the "sapphire-silver" sea. So numerous were the beasts at work that they wrought with "thunder-stilling" fury. Though Rama slumbered his friends toiled at night. Since they were not his slaves they forged the stone chain on the sea without regard to his presence or his absence. Toil became their joy. They loved him, hence they toiled, not lashed by overseers, nor cursed by leaders.

LANKA
BESIEGED

HANUMAN was the first to cross Rama's newly built bridge. He sped over it swiftly. Now as an ambassador he arrived at the court of Ravana. Ravana held court in a palace of gold from a throne of amethyst. Around him stood his sons and nobles. Before this mighty assembly Hanuman announced that a bridge had been built between India and Ceylon. "And that if by the second setting of the sun Sita be not returned to him Rama will lay siege to Lanka."

Ravana's brother, Vivisana, kneeling in a gesture of profound humility and hiding his face on the jasper floor of the court, was heard to say, "O my liege Lord and brother, listen to the supplication of one who weighs his words before he speaks. This man Rama who has bridged the ocean is no common mortal. He seems to be Divine Power in human disguise. I beg you to return Sita his lawful wife and save our precious Lanka."

"Ho, ho, ho," mocked Ravana. He laughed and patted his vast stomach with twenty hands. "If I could only keep my stomach from shaking with laughter. It hurts me. Brother Vivisana, I want to win Sita's love. Until that happens she shall not return to Rama."

"That means, my Lord, that she cannot return at all. But think what Rama will do to Lanka in order to rescue her."

In disgust Ravana grumbled, "Art thou, an immortal, afraid of this mortal from Ayodhya?"

"I am, Your Majesty. I feel that we have done an unrighteous act. He who is guilty of such an act will perish even if he be immortal. I beg thee, return Sita to Rama!"

"Thou art a coward, Vivisana, and no brother of mine. I am no coward."

"I do not wish to anger thee, my Lord. But ere the war begins I beg thee to think upon my words. Rama has done his duty by sending his envoy Hanuman. Thou hast com-

mitted a sin. Repent and Rama will forgive thee. Repent."

"Repent!" Ravana thundered through ten mouths. "Begone!" Then he kicked Vivisana thrice, "Leave my presence, coward. I never repent."

Vivisana who was reeling under the kicks gathered his forces together, composed himself and said quietly, "I go to Rama, but I leave this warning behind. If Lanka is burnt to ruin it is because thy sinful act set it on fire. Farewell!"

Vivisana swiftly jumped on his Ratha (chariot) and urged his winged horses to fly over the ramparts of Lanka to the beach where Rama's army was encamped. There, as his feet touched the ground, he made the sign of truce. Then giving his horses to an ape that was standing by he asked to be ushered into Rama's presence. Since he was a truce-bearer he was swiftly taken into a wooden cabin where Rama, Lakshmana, Sugriva, Angada, Hanuman and Jambuban were making their plans of attack. The moment Vivisana saw Rama a flash of recognition lighted his mind for a moment. It seemed to him that he had seen a soul like Rama somewhere in a realm of perfection. But where and how he could not recall. Then he became aware that Rama had spoken to him. "What brings thee here?"

A voice from within him prompting his outer voice said, "I am Vivisana, Ravana's brother. I come to ask for sanctuary."

"Sanctuary at a mortal's hearth for you an immortal?" exclaimed Rama.

"Ravana, my brother, has spurned me," explained Vivisana. "I begged him to return Sita to thee, but he will not." Slowly with a voice hoarse with humiliation Vivisana told the entire story of his quarrel with Ravana. He asked to be enlisted in Rama's army since Rama represented right and his own brother wrong in this conflict.

Of course as was the custom among noble warriors of those days Rama gave him sanctuary. He and Vivisana swore fidelity to each other.

After that Vivisana gave Rama tidings of Sita who was loved by his wife Sarama. Now both Sarama and Sita were held as hostages by Ravana. It was the common interest of Rama and Vivisana to destroy the ten-headed King of Lanka and rescue their respective wives.

Weary of waiting any longer Rama gave the order for battle. The trumpets sounded far and near, sentries ran from camp to camp, soldiers ran to their posts. Then, lo, the first cohort of apes leaped upon the golden ramparts of Ravana's capital and smote his sentries as the storm smites a grain-field.

RAMA
SUFFERS A REVERSE

AFTER Vivisana had left his presence, Ravana said to his courtiers, "Is there no one loyal amongst my vassals and friends? Are you all cowed by the sight of an army of these men and monkeys? Where is the heroism of Lanka? Who is there amongst you that can go forth as my avenger and spread terror among that rabble of beasts and men?"

Indrajit, the pride of Lanka's youth, the conqueror of Indra [1] the god of gods, stepped forward to speak to his

[1] Indra is the Jupiter of the Hindu mythology.

father and king. His brow was haughtiness itself. His eyes were the very seat of anger and pride. His jaws were more sinister than a lion's. His arms were prowess and skill become bone and muscles. His belly was far behind his chest. As he walked forward with solemn dignity his legs wore the grace of a birch but the strength of earthquakes. In fact the very ground trembled under his lightning-shod feet. After bowing to Ravana with the elegance that might ensue if the Himalayas bent before a mere mortal, Indrajit spoke. His voice rang like the far-off clamour of a flood.

"Majesty of Lanka, master of Paradise and all the worlds, allow my uncle that coward to be forgotten by us. Let Vivisana be erased from thine affection and thought. Without him all Lanka is a home of heroes and naught else. Now permit me to go forth and slay those mortals. Permit me to lift the siege from Lanka. If I fail in the attempt Uncle Kumbhakarna can be roused from sleep. He surely will devour the enemy as the raging ocean the ships. I await your word, O most noble of fathers!"

"Well spoken, O my son." Ravana rose from his throne and embraced Indrajit. "I behold in thy face the very force of death. Perform thy rites of sorcery. For without them thou canst not hide behind the clouds. That magic which is thine alone thou must practice. Lift thyself to the high heavens. Hide thyself behind the clouds! Then strike down

those men and monkeys at our gates with the fierceness of a lion in a herd of cows. Go, my son; show them that Vivisana was an exception and not the rule of our Rakshasa clan." With those words Ravana dismissed his court. Then he went to the Asoka forest to torture Sita with his pleas and prayers.

Indrajit betook himself to the woods and in profound secrecy set to perform his sorcery. In the meantime on the outer ramparts of Lanka till the sun went down the monkeys held their own in a battle with demons that sought to overpower them.

All night long Indrajit kept up his prayers, incantations and sacrifices. Hideous moans rose from the woods as victim after victim was sacrificed by him. The very trees trembled at the demoniac arts that he practiced in their midst. The horror of it was so great that the moon and the stars fled from the Heavens. Yet he continued to perform his magic.

At last at the dawn of day armoured with his power of sorcery the conqueror of Indra shot up into the heavens and hid behind a cloud.

Soon arrows like stinging cobras fell from Heaven upon the monkeys and laid them low. In an hour's time they were driven from the ramparts of Lanka, and had to rally on the sea-shore. There too from behind the cloud the arrows poured like rain. None could see the bow, or who

it was that hurled the venomous shafts. This so frightened them that their ranks broke and all the monkeys ran to the bridge in search of India's shore. In the place of a disciplined army now ran hither and yon a mob of apes and baboons. Terror-stricken, fear-blinded they fled. Lakshmana who was in charge of them aimed an arrow at the cloud. His arrow was named spell-breaker. "Behold," he shouted to his fleeing soldiers, "there is no cloud any more." Lo, the brother of Rama had sent such a weapon that like a sun it devoured the clouds revealing. . . . At last it revealed no one. There seemed to be no person present in that spot of heaven. This frightened the witless monkeys the more. "It must be a god; for we see no being there!" They screamed and ran like lunatics from an asylum.

But in another quarter of the sky another cloud had grown quickly and from behind it poured the death-fanged shafts spreading slaughter through all. Lakshmana shot again a new spell-breaker. The second cloud vanished and revealed no one behind it. Anew a third cloud was formed, and swiftly poured arrows from behind it blinding and killing many cowering monkeys.

Vivisana who was with Rama had seen it all. He was in consternation and said to Rama, "That is Indrajit after Nikumbhila." He then explained how after performing the Nikumbhila sorcery that son of Ravana attained the power to act like a disembodied spirit for three days. "Thus it

Parim

SOON
ARROWS LIKE STINGING
COBRAS
FELL FROM HEAVEN

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was, when Ravana waged war on the gods. His son after Nikumbhila hidden even from the eyes of the gods fought and conquered their chief Indra. Since then we call him Indraconqueror, Indrajit."

"How can we fight such a foe?" asked Rama in dismay.

"The only way to fight him is to hide until it is dark. Then he can see nothing. At night his powers are useless, and in a day or two the magic will run out of its lease and he will be obliged to return to the woods and perform Nikumbhila all over again. Give orders to hide to all your men, O Rama, for two more days."

In the meantime again Lakshmana had broken the spell of the third cloud and was watching the forming of the fourth. Around and about him lay dead and dying apes. It would have been easier to count the waves of the sea than to learn the number slain by Indrajit.

Ere the fourth cloud was quite formed an arrow—named "invisible death," as Vivisana explained later—suddenly pierced Lakshmana and laid him low. None saw it come down. None knew how it entered the young prince's side.

The sight of Lakshmana's fall smote Rama into fury. He strung his bow and shot three arrows at once which was more than any man, demon or god could do. His first arrow set fire to Indrajit's cloud, his second arrow ran around the sky like a circling serpent of incandescence, no matter where a cloud began to grow it was at once set

on fire. The third arrow spread a canopy of light decorated with stars between heaven and earth. Now that all was dark the demon could do no more damage. Baffled by Rama's magic he went back to Lanka.

Having repelled Indrajit Rama ran to where Lakshmana fell. There livid and lifeless lay the second son of King Dasaratha. Rama flung away his bow and quiver of arrows, then lifted that dear form as a mother her death-stricken child and carried it into his hut. He was so saddened that he could not shed tears of grief. His eyes were dulled and dry as a desert at dusk.

Jambuban, the Dewan and doctor in one, examined Lakshmana carefully. In the light of the torches that had been lit he worked. An hour passed ere Jambuban could pronounce his verdict. Rama, Vivisana, Sugriva, and Angada sat silently near the body of Lakshmana. Their example spread through the entire army. Even the smallest ape sat silent. Thoughts of retreat or advance fretted none; nor was there any listlessness among the wounded. Such was the power of silence in their midst.

At last Jambuban spoke: "He will revive if someone can reach the Himalayas and bring from its peak Gandhamadan (Mount Everest) a lily-white herb. Its juice alone can save the life of the prince if applied to his body before the next sunrise."

"Then he is as good as dead," groaned the heart-broken

Rama, "for the Gandhamadan is a thousand miles away from here."

"Grieve not, friend," pled Sugriva. "Listen to mine advice. Hanuman can leap to the north and return in twenty-four hours with the white herb."

"But," answered Rama, "the sun rises and sets in twelve, O king of monkeys."

"Yea, but a monkey knows mathematics," ejaculated Sugriva, "this artificial night that thine arrow has made, how long does it last?"

"Half a day, friend Sugriva," answered Rama meekly.

"Good," exclaimed Hanuman, "that began at noon today. How much does that make?" Vivisana counted. "Six hours of artificial dark, then twelve of God's dark. Canst thou go and return with the herb in eighteen hours!"

"Tell me in language other than hours," demanded Hanuman impatiently.

Sugriva commanded, "It is noon now. Fetch from Gandhamadan the lily white herb before another sunrise. If thou returnest after that thou wilt bring death to Lakshmana. Go, Hanuman. Tarry not. Go. Bring life to Lakshmana by returning hither before the Sun rises again."

"O my son," Rama begged, "save Lakshmana even if thou must keep the Sun from rising at all. Save him, save him." Hanuman, after taking the dust from Rama's feet, put it on his head. Then saluting Sugriva, he sprang into the air.

"Hoohum Hoo," he roared, scattering terror as he went. He coursed like a night bird. The sea below him smelt of salt. The stars hummed like bees above him. He knew what that sound meant. It was an eerie world that he was moving in but it seemed to whet Hanuman's appetite for speed. By the time the real sun had set and the night of God had begun he had not only crossed the ocean but was crossing India lengthwise. Before midnight he had landed on the Chitrakuta hills and rested a few moments.

Then gathering fresh momentum he leaped into the abyss of stars before him.

In an hour's time he passed Ayodhya on the bank of the Saraju. A pang shot through his heart as he heard Bharata and Satrughna walking up and down their palace roof and speaking of "brother Rama, sweet Videhini Sita and the courage-armoured Lakshmana."

He almost descended before them to speak of Lakshmana's state but at the thought that he alone could kill or cure that incomparable prince, Hanuman sped on. "A moment wasted now may mean Lakshmana's death," he muttered to himself. The thought dug into his spirit a fresh goad and he flew northwards swifter than the swiftest flight of man's mind.

Just at midnight he saw Alaka, now the deserted city of the gods in the Himalayan peaks. All its inhabitants were now captive in Lanka. It was ghastly. A human city

without any inhabitants frightens one. But think of the desolation of divine Alaka without its gods! In sheer terror Hanuman sped over the diamond streets of Alaka, its houses of Padmaraga and other most precious stones. Its towers of cornelian, its battlements of chrysoprase, all were covered with dusk. Stillness and hungry echoes coiled around the city of the gods. The more he saw of it the more he disliked it. Unable to bear the horror of it any longer he shut his eyes and swept forward with all his might. Behold, he was going forward faster than ever. Even his own father Pavana, the Storm God, could not keep pace with him.

Now feeling that he had passed Alaka he opened his eyes again. What he saw held his thoughts a long while.

No higher than leap of a lad stood Gandhamadan, the highest peak of the world, before him. On its shoulder the sky seemed to be like a leather mantle (Charmavat akasa) embossed with planets and stars. What a sight!

But Hanuman having come on an errand of mercy could not very well tarry to behold the beauty of the highest Himalaya. He swung around the haughty peak looking for a particular cave where grew the magic vine. It took him a long time to locate it. But once seen there could be no mistake about its identity. In a cave of lilac shadows he perceived the vine rising in thick long lines of milk-paling lustre. He prayed to the herb-god before plucking it. Thus

after propitiating its deity he plucked a tendril. He bowed three times to show his gratitude and respect.

Slowly he walked towards the cave mouth. There the tired monkey rested his limbs a moment. Alas, there is no rest for him who is wicked nor for him who is bent on an act of mercy. Literally unable to rest Hanuman shouted "Jai, Jai Rama," then sprang into the air. In one swoop he cleared the shoulder of the Gandhamadan, and ere one could say "He is scaling the stars," that monkey had set out on his return journey. Past the sleeping Ayodhya, beyond the Vindhya Mountains, leaping over the sapphire Nilgiri peaks he coursed to the southernmost point of India. He was at the threshold of success now. Just then he beheld a blood-freezing sight. The sun was tinting the sea-edge with a drop of fire. Hanuman stuck his hand right under the sea, took the sun like a ripe fruit and put it under his arm. He said, "I will keep thee from rising, O Sun, until Lakshmana is cured. Rama so desires it."

"But I suffocate under thine arm," moaned the Lord of the day.

"It is better than thou shouldst choke than I lose the life of Lakshmana," answered Hanuman.

"But the world needs my light, thou brainless monkey," raged the Sun.

Let the world wait a few hours for once. That will teach it patience," rejoined Hanuman.

"Listen," whimpered the Sun. But Hanuman refusing to listen flew over the Indian Ocean in whose tranquil depth he saw leviathan, dolphins, sharks and ananta, the phosphorescent serpent, all playing like children.

At last, hot, weary and travel-sore he descended at Rama's feet who had kept watch over Lakshmana. He told Rama, "Squeeze the herb and spread its juice over your brother, while I struggle with the god of day, and keep him from rising." He added in a matter-of-fact tone, "The beacon of day is making my feet very hot."

The Sun was furious. He kept on saying as he fought for release: "Thou filthy monkey. One of these days I will scorch thy hide as black as thy face. Let me go, I tell thee."

"He breathes, he breathes," shouted Rama. Those words sent such a thrill of joy through Hanuman's body that his arms became weak and helpless. That instant the Sun fled from his grip and flew to the sky. Lo! it was almost midday. Now that he saw why Hanuman had kept him from rising the Sun forgave that noble monkey his trick.

The news of Lakshmana's cure ran like a forest fire through the army. The very sea resounded with shouts of joy.

DEATH
OF KUMBHAKARNA

AFTER performing the Nikumbhila rites again Indrajit came once more to give battle. This time at the very outset Rama shot his three famous arrows and spread night between that sorcerer prince and his own army. That prevented the latter's slaughter by Indrajit and made him retire within Lanka's gates without accomplishing his end. But he made a third attack shouting, "This time I will unRama and unLakshmana this world. Will bring Uncle Vivisana a prisoner to my father."

But no sooner had he hurled a score of arrows from his hiding place in the sky than Rama with his wizardry spread black night between Indrajit and the earth. The darkness sweet and soft proved harder than the thunderbolt to the Rakshasa's cunningest arrows. Frustrated anew he withdrew into Lanka as he had done before.

Seeing Indrajit balked of his purpose so easily Ravana now thought out another plan of campaign. He gave orders for his giant brother Kumbhakarna, with ears large as wine vats, to be roused from his sleep. Since Vivisana had gone over to Rama's side there was no one in Lanka who had courage enough to contradict Ravana by telling unpleasant truths. So, they did as he had ordered, knowing full well that the vat-eared giant was invincible at war only when he had slept full six months. But if he had been roused even an hour earlier than that span of time he would be vulnerable. Alas, nobody had the courage to say all that to the mad monster King.

But did not the King know it himself? He did. Yet nothing deterred him: he was doom-hurried. And when a soul is rushing towards his doom he reasons as madmen do. Ravana had said to himself, "Rama is but a man; he can be killed by Kumbhakarna whose eyes see in day or night. In order to fight a common man a giant does not need to be wholly invincible. My brother will tear Rama limb from limb as a boy splits a river reed. And what a dinner for Kumbhakarna of monkeys as delicious as the fruits they live upon. "So rouse the vat-eared," he thundered, "let us fill his belly with a herd of luscious apes."

"But it was not easy to rouse a sleeping giant out of season. All the noises of all the demons could not make him stir in his sleep, much less awake him. Drums, large

as oak tree trunks, cymbals big as an elephant's ears, gongs deep as ten-fold tiger roar, a forest of horns each one of which was throated with the bellow of a thousand bisons: all together could not pierce through into the giant's brain. Blare upon blare of trumpets, the howl of crashing cymbals like maniacs caught in a burning house and the groan

of gongs though they almost shook the Sun out of the sky, could not rouse Kumbhakarna.

Now to the ever-augmenting noises they added tortures. Hundreds of Rakshasas pulled his hair, scores pulled his beard, some hung from his eye-brows like bats in a dark castle, while others set fire to his bedding. Still others pressed burning brands into his legs, arms and neck. Last of all a thousand demon boys scratched the soles of his feet with hot needles in order to tickle him out of sleep.

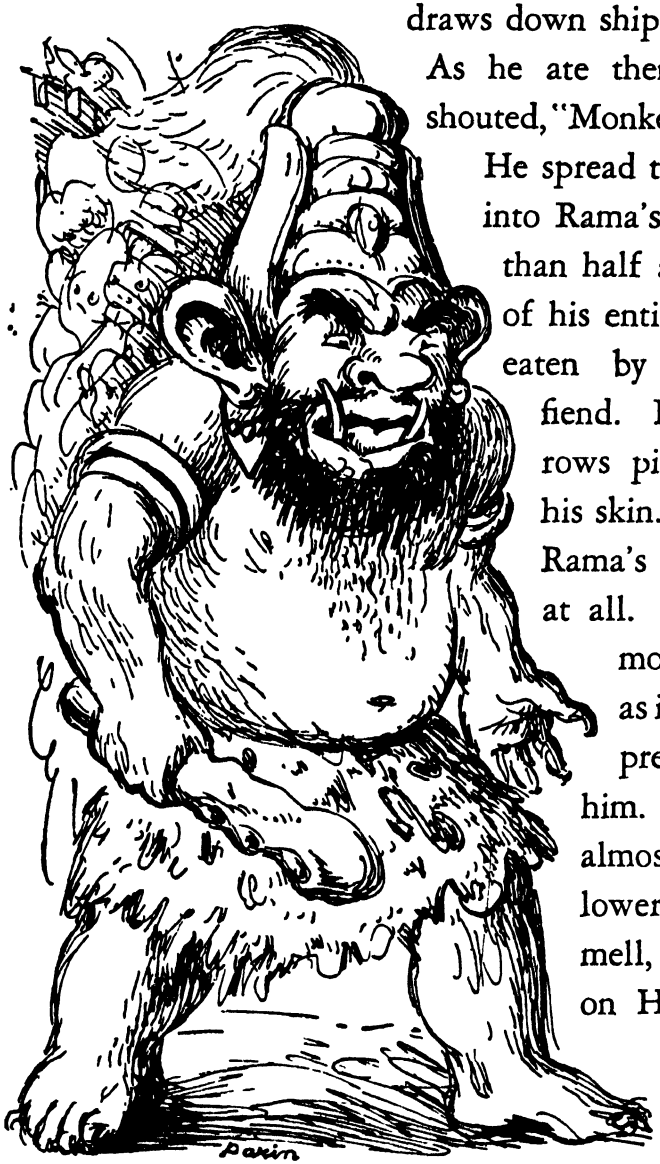
This last attempt succeeded. Suddenly those monstrous

feet moved, the toes long as fire-tongs wiggled. Then a shiver went through the rest of Kumbhakarna like a lightning shock through a mountain range. At last he was waking! A shout of jubilation rose all over Lanka. "The killer of Rama is awake," the Rakshasas chorused so loudly that even Rama's whole army heard it though they were beyond heaven-high walls of the capital.

And when Vivisana heard it he told Rama every secret of Kumbhakarna's life, ending as follows, "In conclusion, bear this well in mind, O King amongst men, had the vat-eared slept his fill of six months he would be immortal for a day. Then he could destroy everything without being destroyed by any. This boon God Shiva granted him years ago. But alas, Ravana's doom-clouded brain does not think properly any more. Kumbhakarna has been awakened prematurely. He is vulnerable. Thou canst slay him. O Ravana, why didst thou steal another's lawful wife? Why didst thou bring death to our Lanka?"

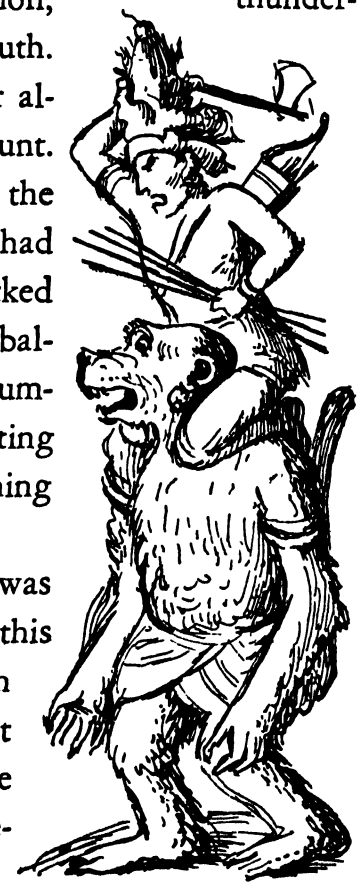
Hardly had Vivisana finished speaking when over the walls of Lanka leaped a shape too terrible to see. His head touched the sky. His eyes were large as the sunset. His nostrils belched forth black smoke whose poison killed everyone who came near it. His legs thick as a hundred elephants, agile as tigers, kicked and killed a thousand apes at a time. His arms, curved like far-flung mountains, crushed baboons and ourangs as a man kills flies. And

every time he opened his mouth and drew a breath through it flocks of chimpanzees were sucked in as a whirlpool draws down ships into the deep. As he ate them the monster shouted, "Monkeys taste sweet." He spread terror and death into Rama's army. In less than half a day a quarter of his entire strength was eaten by the vat-eared fiend. Lakshmana's arrows pierced not even his skin. Only some of Rama's best shafts told at all. Even they not mortally. It seemed as if nothing would prevail against him. At last, seeing almost all of his followers run away pell-mell, Rama jumped on Hanuman's back and urged him forward, "On to battle,



my son. Help me to slay the monster, you bite his legs while I smite his face, arms and neck. Run! Quick, ere we are all eaten by him."

With a roar that out-roared Kumbhakarna's, Vir (hero) Hanuman grew as large as the former, then plunged forward. He buried his large teeth into the Rakshasa's thigh. The latter's pain made him yell a sky-blasting shout. That instant Rama hurled his Dambholi, thunder-javelin, into the vat-eared's open mouth. Blood spurted out of it like a river almost deluging Rama and his mount. Now the Rakshasa smote Rama on the head with a living monkey that he had lifted by its limbs. This nearly knocked Rama off Hanuman's back. But he balanced himself and swiftly smote Kumbhakarna with his battle-axe, cutting down his right arm. It fell crushing many monkeys under it.



The giant whose other arm was squeezing Hanuman's throat all this time to loosen the latter's teeth from his thigh now let go of that in order to bring it down upon the head of Rama. Seeing the blow descend, that artful warrior leaped

off Hanuman's back and escaped the stroke. Then as a man lops off an elephant's trunk with his axe he cut the vat-eared's remaining hand at his elbow. And where it fell it crushed to death a host of chimpanzees. Not yet unnerved the grim Rakshasa swung his stump and hit Hanuman on the head till the latter dropped senseless as a woman in a swoon. Just then Rama thrust a spear into Kumbhakarna's throat and followed it with a stroke of his axe that brought down the giant's head which fell not on land but into the blue-black sea whose waters rose fifty fathoms foaming and sizzling like a cauldron of boiling milk. Slowly swayed the rest of Kumbhakarna. At last it fell backwards against the heaven-high walls of Lanka, whence rose a wail of sorrow and despair from innumerable throats of fiends, that had been watching the onslaught.

THE RUSE OF INDRAJIT

AT the death of Kumbhakarna all Lanka was plunged into mourning. They mourned his death for months. No warrior issued from its gates to give battle to Rama's hosts, nor did the wind waft over its walls any sound of pleasure and peace from the besieged city. Ravana wailed with sorrow as his twenty eyes shed tears.

"O my Kumbhakarna, O my brother, canst thou forgive me for prematurely rousing thee from thy slumber? Wilt thou ever forgive my sending thee from a couch of sleep to thy death? O my reason, how couldst thou devise such a conduct? O my fatal word, how couldst thou issue from my mouth and send that king of giants to his death? O

my beloved vat-eared brother, where art thou now? Who accompanies thee in thy wanderings in the world beyond our human state?"

The lament of Ravana was taken up by all his family. Every Rakshasa made lament for the departed hero. Even Indrajit, that hardest of heroes, wept like a child for days. Every day was as ashen and warmthless as every other for nearly a month. "Ah, Kumbhakarna, O Kumbhakarna," that is all that they said and could say all the time.

But the Vanaras (monkeys) of Rama who had allowed a month's truce to the sorrowing demons now began to hammer at the gates of Lanka. Sugriva flung mountains at it as a boy throws stones, Angada hurled big deodars (cedar trees) like spears. Hanuman butted on Lanka's walls with his hard head till they began to shake. While Rama and Lakshmana with the help of the rest of the monkeys began to build a wooden wall on which he intended to transport all the army over into the golden town of Ravana.

In order to prevent them the numerous sons of the Rakshasa King came forth and gave battle to the hosts of Rama. On fire-hued aerial chariots they came and wrought havoc among monkeys and men. Day after day, month after month, the numerous progeny of Ravana's many wives fought and perished in their effort to stem the tide of their conquering foes. Months rolled into years. Yet the

apparently weak men and apes were not beaten and flung into the seas.

Ravana grew more and more impatient as son after son perished in battle. His sorrow rose steeper as the corpses of the Rakshasas grew larger in the field of battle. He became so restless and angry that he ordered his watchers to inflict fresh tortures on Sita in her forest prison. Even so, that diamond of purity did not break down, nor did she give up her vow to remain true to Rama.

At such a juncture Indrajit devised a cruel plan of attack on the besiegers of Lanka. Through wizardry he placed a perfect likeness of Sita before himself on his chariot, then leading an enormous number of Rakshasas went forth to battle. He set out without doing his Nikumbhila yajna, which alone could make him immune from death. But he was so angry that he did not mind being careless. He showered arrows of dire force—jarapasa, disease shaft; mrityu pasa, death shaft; swarpa pasa, cobra arrows, and maha mrityu, the javelins of bitter death. Monkeys fell under the blows of his axe as saplings under an elephant's trunk. Even Hanuman was so wounded that he could not fight any more.

Hosts of Rakshasa, falling upon the chimpanzees and baboons, devoured them like carrots. Between their hands the fiends cracked small monkey-skulls as an ape cracks a walnut between his fingers. They fed upon Rama's army

like famine and plague. As the storm-fanged sea devours skiffs and cockle-shells the demons sucked in the monkeys. And not one of them dared hurl a stick or stone for fear that they might strike Sita. The intrepid Rama and Lakshmana could not rally their followers for they themselves were unmanned when they beheld her visage on the prow of Indrajit's Rath. Suddenly making sure that Rama had seen him and amid a universal carnage of apes by Rakshasas, Indrajit drew his sword and cut off Sita's head which fell in two from the chariot on the beach as lifeless as the sand. It was a terrible sight. The horror of it was so great that even the vultures of the air flew away from it, hiding their heads in their wings. Hawks and eagles, in order to spare their eyes, rose higher and higher till they could see nothing. Not only birds, even crocodiles, sharks, and Makara—leviathan—sank deep into the water in order to see no more of the horror on the shore.

Indrajit lashed his winged horses, turned about and flew back leading his followers into the golden city. The gates of Lanka opened like a mother's arms to receive them. Rejoicing spread its beauty on the town. Every house echoed with laughter again. Each street glowed as if a thousand suns were on it. Outside the besiegers on the sand looked morose and downcast. The death of Sita had unnerved them all. If pleasure danced on the streets of Lanka desolation surely ruled over the beach without.

INDRAJIT'S FALL

JUST then something was happening that no one had noticed. Vivisana and Rama's brother had swiftly stolen into Lanka unexamined by the gatemen within. None save Rama knew where the two had gone caught in the stream of Rakshasas returning with victory. Through a spell of magic all his own, Vivisana led Lakshmana into the city hitherto impregnable to all. To such a plan of action Rama was counselled by Vivisana, "Now that he had not performed Nikumbhila," explained his uncle, "Indrajit is vulnerable. Lakshmana must follow even into Lanka and slay Ravana's offspring."

"How to achieve that? Tell me, friend Vivisana, if there is a way to punish this slayer of Sita," questioned Sita's Lord.

"It was not Sita that he slew," explained Vivisana.

"How"—Rama and Lakshmana were so astonished at what they heard that Vivisana repeated, "I am certain that

it was a trick, O Rama. Do you think Ravana who has lost all his sons but one, his brother Kumbhakarna and thousands of friends and relatives for the sake of keeping Sita, would allow her to be butchered so?"

"Speak, speak, such words as thou hast spoken—let them fall like rain into my thirsty soul," begged the two brothers. To that request Vivisana said, "Now that Indrajit has stooped to such low magic I will take Lakshmana into Lanka with me through Gupta-patha by my own magic art. I know a way that will take us to the heart of the capital. There we shall follow Indrajit who I am certain is going to his forest to perform Nikumbhila which will make him invulnerable. Now is the time to find and kill him. Follow me, hasten."

Lest Lakshmana lose his way in Lanka, Vivisana, who knew the city, went everywhere with him. All night they followed Indrajit whithersoever he sped.

"He is going to his forest to perform Nikumbhila yajna, O prince," whispered Vivisana again. "Let us go thither, and ere he starts his magic give him battle immediately. Hither—sh—hsh——"

It was indeed good fortune that Indrajit's path skirted the Asoka forest that night. And destiny was doubly kind to let Lakshmana and Vivisana see Rama's bride and hear her in corverse with Sarama, Vivisana's queen. That almost stunning shock of pleasure unnerved Lakshmana as he

saw in the moonlight Sita's living form. And her speech to his listening tasted as a "broken honeycomb."

Before they had passed the Asoka forest they heard Sita say to Sarama, "With thy husband's aid Rama will win. He will rescue us both, thyself for Vivisana." The pursuers of Indrajit, since they were hurried, could tarry no farther nor make themselves known to anyone. They must destroy Indrajit tonight. Before that grim resolve all else gave way. So they went their way though their hearts were hungry for speech with the two women.

At last in the depth of a forest they stopped. There stood a temple of amethyst and topaz on the shore of a pool filled with liquid moon. There they noticed Indrajit. After totally unarming himself he bathed in the waters, then coming ashore set to pray for magic powers. He was devotion incarnate it seemed. That instant Lakshmana burst upon him.

"How darest thou come here?" thundered the slayer of Indra.

"I come to combat with thee. Be ready, for now I strike."

"Thou dog of a man—ah, I see it is Vivisana who has led thee hither. Ho, noble uncle, the gem of treachery, thou diamond among traitors, thou very gold of cowardice, it is thou who hast brought this vermin here to slay me. He has learnt then from thy purity-scoured mouth that until my yajna of Nikumbhila is finished I am as mortal

as he. But mortal though I be I shall teach this brother of apes how Rakshasas can fight. Come, dog, bite."

"Bite I will," thundered Rama's brother, "but not like a dog. Here is thine uncle's weapon. Arm thyself with it." It fell with the Jhun jhuna shiver and clutter as Lakshmana took it from Vivisana's scabbard and threw it at Indrajit's feet. "Now taste death or make me taste it. Come thou, O stink of arrogance."

Ere Indrajit had gripped the sword the battle was joined. Like lions in a cage they fought. They shrieked and gored each other like bulls. Thrust and parry, parry and thrust, swifter than the fall of the bolt of heaven, sharper than the edge of razors, the swords cut and hissed. In vain they thrust, and in vain they parried. They seemed too well-matched. At last Lakshmana smote a blow that loosed the sword from Indrajit's hand. In despair and terror the latter ran around the temple flinging at Lakshmana lamps, torches and vessels that belonged to the Deity. But that redoubtable youth struck each thing down as if his sword were hitting flowers in a mock fight. At long last he caught Indrajit. The latter slipped, and as he was falling Lakshmana thrust his sword into him with all his weight and might. Lo, with a heart-rending yell of rejoicing it seemed Indrajit's soul—a part of God, like all souls—was uncaged from the fiend's body and flew back to the Infinite from which it had fallen. But what a shriek—no man had ever heard such a shriek of joy before from a soul set free.

INDRAJIT'S FUNERAL

GRIEF like the tusks of an elephant pierced him when Ravana learnt of his son's fate. The chief God Indra, who had been captive in Lanka for ages through the prowess of Indrajit now revolted and flew away to Heaven, shouting joyously. All the world heard him, including Ravana. Now that there was none to compel tribute of him Indra, though yet alone, set up his rule in Heaven.

"O my son, cloud-dweller, O compeller of Indra, scorcher of foes!" Ravana raised the lament. He hurried with his court and all his wives to the forest where lay his eldest-born inert as ivory striped with red. His eyes closed, his lips locked, his hair trembling in the breeze, that terror of the gods now struck terror into his father's

heart. Death at last took a shape and form that Ravana understood and he trembled as a tree when the axe is laid at its root. "Is this death? I have never seen death before as I see it now." He exclaimed further, "I know, I see, I grasp—with Sita I brought not a woman but death into our midst," thus complained Ravana of his own folly in many metaphors. But they could not bring Indrajit back to life. Indrajit's wife wailed as she flung herself on his body, and as a lioness' tongue licks her dead cub her hand played over his white body. In response not a breath, not a tremor of limb, not even the flutter of an eye-lid made he. Like Mainaka—a mountain fallen into the ocean—Indrajit never rose again.

In the meantime Rama's truce-bearer was announced. He had come with the word,—"The whole beach is cleared. All our troops are on the causeway. Bring forth your dead and cremate him with fitting ceremony. Truce reigns everywhere, O King."

At those words Ravana realized that Rama was descended of royal kings. Only a noble man of long royal lineage understood what befitted and when and how to perform the rites. The funeral procession wound out of Lanka to the beach at noon. Women walked at its head. They were more comely than other women and their sorrowful treading communicated to all the woe of the unmothered and unhusbanded. Rama wept with Lakshmana

as their eyes gazed upon what they had done to the fair women of that fair city.

After the women came the bier sombre as black marble covered with shrouds. He who had worn Parijat, the star-flowers of Heaven, in life, now lay flowerless like a common thief.

Behind him his widow, his son of ten and after them Ravana stepped leading many warriors, all lamenting, contrasting mightily with the soft shedding of tears by the silent women.

Over the spectacle of death there now appeared through the wide open gates the wonder of all ages—Kanaka Lanka Poori—the gold-red city of Lanka. There shone neither sun nor moon, yet light never died completely there. The basilica of pomegranate-coloured gems, the walls of argent embossed with sapphire serpents, the brows of the houses haughty with agate, emerald and opals. The fountains sobbing everywhere in their basins of platinum humbled the minds of men and monkeys. No such wonder had they dreamt of outside Heaven where Indra lives.

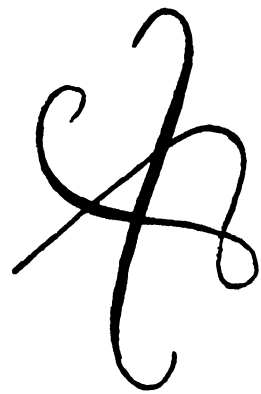
Now their ears caught the funeral strains. Lo, the sandal-wood pyre was already burning while a thousand priests intoned:

"Ayam asya dhamyate nalir
Ayam girvi pariskrita."

Then they chanted:

"Akasasthu niralamba—Thou art homeless on the water,
Thou art homeless on the earth,
Thou art homeless in the air.

"Prehi, prehi pathivi purbervi—Go, soul, on the dustless paths
of mystery,
Reach the presence of God,
There abide in eternal glory."



THE FALL OF RAVANA

THE death of Indrajit had entered Ravana's soul and stung it like a cobra. Even torturing Sita with new devices ceased to please him. He commanded his watchers to treat her kindly. The fact was that his eldest-born's death had robbed him of all interest in her. Yet he would not return her to Rama, for that he imagined would lower the dignity of his house. Besides he was too proud to do now what his brother Vivisana had counselled at the very beginning. So as soon as the period of mourning was over he flung open the gates of Lanka and issued forth at the head of his troops, "to unRama the whole earth."

His ten mouths roared like ten volcanoes. His ten pairs of teeth glistened like lightning. And the ten bows that

his twenty arms used twanged like a herd of roaring lions. Behind came Rakshasas of equally grim appearance. Some were half-lion and half-elephant, some had heads of rhinoceros and feet of men, some looked like crocodiles on tigers' legs. Others half-ape and half-wolf, still others black panthers with faces of human babes, came forward to destroy and devour men, monkeys and all. Drums made of sorrow, cymbals of woe, gongs of despair, and trumpets of horror with their noises struck terror into the hearts of the apes. Even Vir Hanuman shivered a moment before he plucked up his courage and attacked. Angada who was shuddering now followed his example. Sugriva, that hurler of hills, shouted, "If you do not fall on them and kill, fear will kill you. Forward, you sons of monkeys! Forward, O paragons of courage! Forward, dogs! Forward, O my brothers." Screaming, weeping with despair, jabbering with rage and leaping with fury they fell upon the Rakshasas. Belching forth death upon one another—apes and demons fought.

And over that universal chaos rose Ravana's chariot driving through the air towards Rama and Lakshmana. It did not take them long to see him. Those two destitute human beings with their bows and arrows met him whose armour was adamant and whose strength quenchless. Ravana's force had scorched and branded with the mark of slavery all the Gods. The two brothers knew indeed too

well that in that chariot of fire-gold sat one who was too powerful to be taken lightly even by the Gods.

But thought was put out of their minds by the thirst of action that possessed them. To Ravana's ten arrows they could send only two. So they hurried their hands. Their four eyes had to act for twenty. As a disc spins faster and faster till all one sees is but one revolving point so they saw nothing but Ravana's chariot and aimed arrows at it. Arrows shrieked through the air. As rains mark with thousand scars a black hillside so arrows streamed from Ravana. Leaping, stinging and singing arrows wove death in the air, and even the fleeing birds could not escape their meshes.

At last Lakshmana cut Ravana's four arms and two heads. Scarcely had he done so when a swarpa-pasa, cobra arrow, pierced his own arm, robbing it of all strength. Seeing his brother disabled so early in the conquest Rama quadrupled his skill; roaring like a tawny torrent down a precipice he rushed forward hurling terrible arrows: Indrastra, arrow of Indra; Rudraraga, Shiva's anger; Suryateja, the Sun's flames and Chandra tusar: moon blizzard —he showered them upon Ravana. Like a forest of tuskers Rama's arrows trumpeted forward.

But the demon King cut those arrows in the air with his own as a falcon with his talons scatters the feathers of its prey.

Just then Indra sent down to Rama his magic chariot pulled by winged horses white as moonlight. Rama urged by Matali the charioteer leaped on it. Swiftly rising onto Ravana's level he shouted, "Now you shall be quenched, O fire of evil." Saying this he flung at him the sharpest shafts. They stung Ravana like hornets. He wheeled around and manoeuvered, but could not dodge Rama's darts. At this juncture Rama stopped to look below. There he saw Rakshasas and monkeys so mixed that they were like two fighting pythons lost in each other's coils. Ere he looked up again Ravana had shot off the standard of Rama's chariot and wounded the charioteer. Still another shaft the monster sent piercing Rama almost to death. At that Matali the charioteer shrieked at him.

"Indra told me ere I came down that in thy quiver sleeps the arrow that will slay the ten-necked beast. Thou wert born to rid the earth of this fiend. While I wheel the chariot about, dodging every foul blow, recollect what thought thou hadst before thy soul was born as Rama. Dig out of the cavern of memory the name and nature of the weapon thou needest. It was called God's Shaft. The world-sire put it in thy mind ere thou wast born. From thy thought thou hast fashioned it and put it to sleep in thy quiver. Pull it out of its cradle now, let it fly from thy bow and hurl Ravana into his grave."

While Rama thought upon this saying hard and deeply,

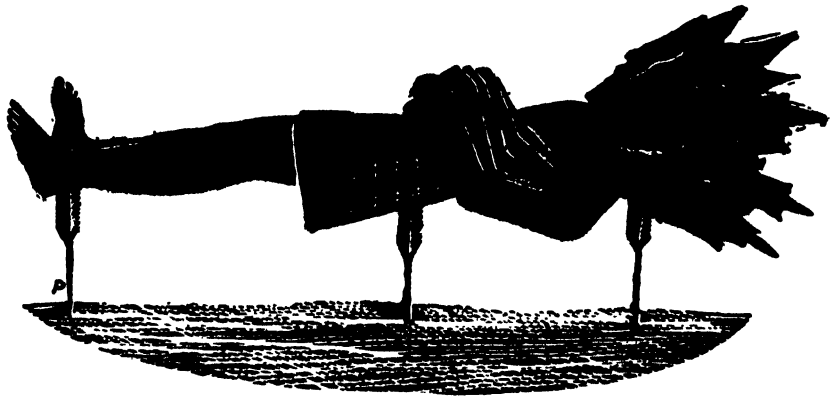
Matali drove his chariot like a rudderless boat on a stormy sea. Thus it eluded Ravana's death-edged arrows that filled the heavens with their humming.

At last Rama heard his own mind say, "Place the arrow named the 'edge of God' on the string of thy bow." He did it quicker than the telling. The shaft was like a thirsty living thing. As a tiger's tail it seemed to lash. As an angry adder it throbbed and hissed. Then with the leap of an eagle it scattered Ravana's arrows to the fleeing winds. It ploughed the sky against it as it sped. Comets and planets ran from their places as it pursued Ravana whithersoever he ran. . . . "Too late, too late," cried the air, "too late, Ravana, too late," the gods were heard saying. "Too late, monster." Like the Himalayas falling at the world's end Ravana fell with the arrow sizzling its way through his brain. His heads all pierced and his mind haunted by terrible images he lay on the ground dying.

Now, seeing their Lord fallen and vanquished, all the remaining Rakshasas fled for life. But the relentless Vanars followed hot-foot and captured all Lanka ere the Sun had set. Until each demon begged for mercy they made him taste death in the skirmishes that ensued. Now Hanuman, that priceless monkey, ran through the streets to the Asoka woods and broke the glad news to Rama's queen.

"Ravana is dead," he shouted with joy. Alas, that shout was snuffed out like a candle light by the storm of wailing

from the throats of the widowed Rakshasa wives. "Ha, Lanka, Ha Ravana," drowned all other noises, as completely black night fell on Lanka for the first time in a thousand years. For with the fall of Ravana the imprisoned gods were set free. And since they would serve Lanka no more and keep it in a state of perpetual twilight the whole Rakshasa kingdom fell under the tyranny of seasons and shifting hours.



RAVANA'S FUNERAL

WHEN Vivisana saw his brother fall an overwhelming sorrow possessed his soul. All the memories of his childhood with Ravana and Kumbhakarna, the years of severe penance before the God Shiva, then their wars with the gods under Indra, the fair fight for Paradise and its conquest, then a thousand years of peace and felicity in Lanka rushed upon him. He wept bitter tears, "O my brother, O my Ravana, suckled at the same breast as I, through my help art thou now slain by Rama. What have I done? Who made me do it?" He fell on his knees beside the mortally wounded Ravana. Though Rama had silenced many of his mouths, there remained one able to speak. Hearing Vivisana's lament Ravana answered, "Weep no more, brother. I bear thee no ill will. If I have any power in my soul I use it now to forgive thee. Look after the widows and orphans of Lanka. Rule in my stead, not as I did, but as a father rules his numerous offspring."

Those noble words spoken by Ravana made Vivisana weep all the more. "Thou hast spoken like thine old self. Now my youth's Ravana is back! Then nobility was thy garment, benevolence thy gesture, large-heartedness thy conduct, and sweetness thy speech. O Ravana, gather thy forces together, make an effort to live. Rule again in Lanka in thy ancient majesty."

But life was ebbing fast out of his body. He was in death's invincible grip. Now Rama asked Lakshmana, "What is the proper thing to do ere the Rakshasa chief dies?" That resourceful youth pleaded ignorance thus: "We have been camping like rustics these fourteen years. Our minds have grown too soldierly and our sense of courtesy has wasted away. It is wiser to ask Vivisana's advice, for he has been a courtier for centuries."

When they repaired to Vivisana and made known their wish, that lord of Sarama said in whispers, "It is the custom of royal masters to ask forgiveness of a fallen foe. That done you must beg him to instruct you in life's philosophy. Lastly you must ask him what he wishes you to do with his kingdom, queen and subjects that he leaves behind."

So with folded palms the two brothers knelt on the two sides of the dying Ravana and made him the threefold inquiry.

"Let me look upon you, O slayers of foes," said Ravana.

Vivisana lifted him up, then Rama drove three arrows deeply into the ground. Like three pillars they supported Ravana's giant body. The dying chief smiled wanly and exclaimed, "O Rama, thou knowest how to treat a dying warrior. Uncultivated shopkeepers would have brought me pillows with which to prop me up. But this most recent act of thine bespeaks a hero better than aught else. Thou hast treated me well. Thou hast not insulted me with softness but given me the warrior's most fitting support of arrows. Thou with unerring taste hast served my sense of fitness ere I die."

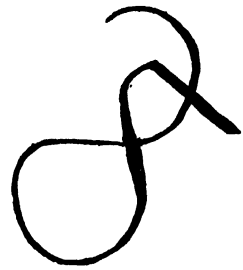
"But I beg you, O Royal hero," requested Rama, "to instruct me. Please satisfy our threefold inquiry."

"I forgive thee readily, O Rama. Now I beg thee to forgive my sins. . . . My wishes, I leave them to thine own instinct to fathom and carry out. A word about life's philosophy, then I shall take leave of life. What I shall say is very trite, but it is true. If thou inclinest to do a good deed, start it at once. If to do an evil act thou feelest inclined, postpone starting it indefinitely. My own life is a parable. I once wished to built a marble stairway to Heaven so that all creatures could climb to God easily. Alas, I put off my dream from day to day, till I dreamt no more of it. But when Surpanakha came and set my mind on fire with her scheme of robbing Sita from you I did not tarry. I acted at once. Lo, to what pass that hasty evil deed has

brought me. So learn by my example. Do selfless deeds at once. Those that are selfish put them off till they cease to trouble thy mind."

With those words spoken in a whisper Ravana died at Rama's feet. Swiftly his soul rose like a bird of white fire, and soared to Heaven. A man who pays the penalty of an evil life here on earth is released from paying it hereafter. Ravana was amply chastised by Rama, he needed no further chastising. So his spirit joined its sire—God.

Next day after his funeral when his ashes were scattered on the sea, Rama proclaimed Vivisana ruler of Lanka and solemnly signed a treaty of peace with the new King.



SITA'S ORDEAL

THE joy of meeting after fourteen years of separation was so great that if Rama and Sita were asked to describe it, they could not find the adequate words. How then can the words of a stranger, the tongue of a poet, or the pen of a scribe do justice to such an event?

It is better that the thread of the story should be taken up with Sita's ordeal. There was and is an ancient custom in India that if a woman who was stolen returns to her own people she must show that she has been pure during

the years of her absence. Though Sarama, Vivisana's queen, and other Rakshasas testified that Sita had always repelled the advances of Ravana, yet Rama and Sita both held it necessary that she should walk through fire. In case she came forth unscorched before many witnesses then she could occupy her place as the queen of Ayodhya. "My purity must be tested by the fire," she said to Rama.

So the day set for their departure from Lanka saw the ordeal of Sita. Indra with his recently liberated gods brought Rama the Pushpaka Rath, aerial chariot, for his journey to Ayodhya. This they did to pay their debt to him. The latter was grateful in turn to Indra for the Rath that was sent him for fighting Ravana successfully. Rama thanked him in public. Then men, beasts and gods wended their way to Sita's ordeal.

In another quarter of Ceylon, at its northern gate a vast fire had been built and kindled. Surrounding it at a distance of ten yards stood Rakshasas, monkeys, the gods and the two human princes. Outside on the beach horses and chariots of gold, opal, and silver thronged like fabulous dreams. Save for the champing of the steeds and the threne of the sea the world was hushed with expectancy. Everyone said in his heart, "Will Sita emerge out of this fire ordeal unscarred, unscorched and unblemished?"

Only five persons were sure that she would. They were Rama, Lakshmana, Sarama, Vivisana and Hanuman. But

all five of them were not nearly as sure as Sita herself. Those fourteen years she knew she had spent thinking of Rama, dreaming of Rama, and longing for Rama. Not a moment had she spent without Rama. Ravana might have tortured her for a thousand years more, yet she could not have been separated from Rama. Compared with those tortures of the past years this fire test was nothing. That morning while Sarama, the present queen of the Rakshasas, was dressing her in the royal palace Sita was thinking and enumerating to herself each one of the subtle and sinister torments that Ravana had inflicted on her. And she wondered how she had withstood so much pain.

Thinking in that vein she came to the gate of Lanka where the fire for her ordeal was burning. Slowly she advanced toward it. The assembled multitude was so moved by the vision of her face that from the gods to the apes each one exclaimed, "Sadhu, pavitra—saintly purity abides in this woman."

The marble serenity of her face was augmented by the garment she wore, it trembled like waters of gold with every step she took. She walked on and on into the very forest of flames not even pausing to distinguish where the pavements of Lanka ended and the fire began. The flames the moment they touched the hem of her garment became white. Blade after blade of the garnet fire blanched and bent before her. Step by step, stem by stem, she trod. . . .

At last she came forth smiling, triumphant. Even her dress had not caught fire. So great was her chastity.

When she emerged, unscarred, unblemished, the gods shouted with joy. The monkeys leapt up to the golden trees of Lanka and showered jewel-shaming flowers on Sita. The Rakshasas beat their drums while Rama and Lakshmana wept like souls lost in bliss.

Still, Sita walked on between the separating wall of gods and monkeys to the Pushpaka chariot. There she took her seat. Rama followed her example and seated himself by her. Lakshmana and others each ascended different cars of celestial contrivance and made ready to depart.

After saying a final farewell to Vivisana and the gods, the men and monkeys rose to the sky heading for Ayodhya.

Now Rama and Sita held sweet converse, and as they looked back upon the past fourteen years they wondered if it were not better for their own happiness that both of them had endured so much, and triumphed so well.

"Behold," said Rama, "there is Lanka, a realm of beauty resting on the shoulder of the sea. The haughty brows of the houses gemmed with a thousand precious stones, the gardens wrought like forests of Heaven, the brooks purling and preening themselves before their mirror, the stainless sky, those mountainous walls of gold, the ivory stairs of the sapphire bathing pools, and those birds—Chakrabakas —the iridescent-feathered pheasants, the silent peacocks,

and the songsters pouring their melodies from trees, roofs and gilded balconies. As you look and listen do you not feel that Lanka is not rustic as our own kingdom? It is not as rude as our own nation. O Sita, we have seen a most exalted civilization and conquered a foe worthy of our mettle. . . . Though we have suffered exceedingly, now that we have emerged with our love intact it was all for the best, my sweet.

"Now we are passing over the sea. There lies my bridge, a chain of rocks around the neck of the sea. Men, giants and beasts toiled to build it for the freeing of thee, my bride."

"But," cried Sita, "why, now that thy purpose is achieved, leave not the ocean free, my Lord? It is not meet that the sea should be left in chains by us who are at last free."

That instant Rama stooped over the side of the Rath, and with the end of his titanic bow pried out of place a dozen hills and flung them away as a deer shakes off velvet from its antlers. Lo, the sea hissed and surged and flung its emerald arms this way and that, feeling its freedom in every limb. Thus was undone that bridge. Sita's kindness gave freedom even to the raging deep.

Today between India and Ceylon lies a stretch of giant rocks showing where Rama built his causeway, and where he undid it in order to please his bride.

RETURN TO AYODHYA

PRECEDED by thousands of monkeys the Pushpaka (Rath) sped over the Cape Kanya Kumari, then into the heart of the southern hills. There Chatakas flew up to the sky thinking the raincloud of July had come; storks made eye-pleasing circles against the horizon, and peacocks danced on branches of beryl. And when they learnt that it was not their friend the cloud of the southern seas but the king of men, Rama was returning, they became

delirious with joy. Even the roots and seeds that were hidden in the soil put forth flowers and fruits as their tribute to Sita. Dried-up springs and scrawny streams became full and limpid overnight so that Sita could look into them and rearrange her wind-blown hair. Because they had seen that divine visage in themselves they took on new names. Even to this day lakes and streams of India are called Sita-Kundu, Rama-Ganga and a thousand other names that remind mankind that over these lay the path of Rama. Even hills and forests could not resist the temptation of renaming themselves. So here grew Rama Giri, Rama's Peak, there Sita Parvat, Sita's range. In short they were so noble and so holy that the earth seemed created anew because they had passed over it. Nay, even the heavens were renamed. That weapon of Indra, the rainbow, was named anew: Rama Dhanu, the bow of Rama.

In several days they reached Kishkindha, the kingdom of Sugriva. The wives of the monkey-folks rejoiced to receive their hero husbands in their arms. Monkey mothers embraced their sons, sisters their brothers on housetops and forest branch.

After reproclaiming Sugriva King of Kishkindha, and spending a few days there Rama sent Hanuman ahead to Ayodhya. "Go north, my son, and learn if all is well with Guha, my friend. Then going further north ascertain from the citizens of Ayodhya if they still love Rama. Learn from

markets and meeting places if my brother Bharata has thrown my sandals down from the throne and proclaimed himself emperor. If the citizens intimate that he has done so return hither without divulging thy name nor the nature of thy mission."

"Impossible," Lakshmana exclaimed in indignation, "Bharata can not do such a thing. He has not usurped your throne. Why send a spy there? Let us go thither ourselves."

"Thy indignation does thee credit, brother Lakshmana. But," continued Rama, "I trust that Hanuman's going casts no aspersion on the character of noble Bharata. I was not thinking of that brother of mine. It was his mother, our step-mother Keikeyi, whose powers are great. I wish Vir Hanuman to go and learn. If he returns with the news that Keikeyi has made Bharata usurp the throne then we shall not return to Ayodhya to trouble and embarrass our brother. Instead here we shall spend the rest of our days at the court of our friend Sugriva."

"So be it," answered the pinnacle of nobility Lakshmana.

"Further, O Hanuman," Rama commanded, "if thou seest that Bharata rules in my name and all our subjects await our return then break the news to him that we are on the way. Having done that start southwards. Tarry with friend Guha, please inform him that I shall stop at his door to rest a day. Then, O diadem of kindness, come to

me on the wings of lightning. Go with my blessings to Ayodhya. Go without delay."

After saluting Sita and the two brothers with hoohoonkar—roaring like thunder—that incarnation of the wind-god leaped up into the heavens. In a trice he ploughed through the horizon.

On reaching Ayodhya he became small as a mouse and eavesdropped in shops, meeting places and palace-roofs. Everywhere he heard but two words, "Sita and Rama." Every soul was eager to hear news of them now that the years of exile were over.

In the throne room of the royal palace he found Bharata seated in the prime minister's chair while the throne itself was occupied by Rama's padooka—sandals. Thus one by one were dispelled all Hanuman's doubts. He was more than certain that for Rama, of Rama and by Rama all Ayodhya lived and had its life.

One morning Bharata met a large monkey-emissary entering the court room begging for audience. He as well as all the courtiers were surprised. None had ever seen such a black face on so white a body.

Seeing them speechless the monkey answered, "I bring news of Rama." That word, Rama, loosened all the tongues as the dawn sets buzzing a bee-hive.

"Speak, speak," Hanuman heard nothing else for awhile. "Speak, speak," besought Bharata.

After bowing low before the throne, then at Bharata's feet Vir Hanuman gave his message to the assembled court. Every soul present there listened as echoes do for sounds.

Hardly had Hanuman finished when Bharata gave orders to the city. "Let men, women and children throw off their mourning of the past years. Each citizen should put on rejoicing for a dress. Even the cows of the pastures should be made happy. Let elephants be caparisoned with cloths of gold. Let horses be saddled and wrapped in pearl-wrought leather. Make the chariots and charioteers hasten to the King of Nishadas, Guha, there to wait for Rama. Set up emerald gates of bamboo at every street corner. Pile golden bananas at every milestone on the royal road so that all of Rama's incoming monkeys will have plenty to feast upon. Hasten, there is not a moment to be lost."

Hanuman flew fast southwards now, tarrying just the necessary amount of time to tell Guha the glad news. He did not even wait to hear what Guha had to say in reply. Faster and faster he sped through the air like haste itself gone out of its head.

And when he gave the tidings to Rama and Lakshmana they both said, "Nothing less than what we expected of brother Bharata." Now that incomparable baboon ran to the monkey folk apprising them of the mountains of bananas waiting to be eaten at every milestone to Ayodhya. Everyone hearing the good news shouted, "To Ayodhya we

shall go for the bananas. Bharata has the stomach of a god and the brains of a mother. He understands apes. To Ayodhya."

Next day as many monkeys as King Sugriva could spare set out with Angada and Hanuman for Ayodhya. They journeyed far ahead of Rama's aerial chariot; for they were heading for those "banana milestones."

When King Guha saw Rama again he wept like a child that had found its lost mother. "What joy, what enchantment, what peace to see thee again." So cried Guha in Rama's embrace. Hardly had they done embracing when Rama's eyes glancing over Guha's shoulder saw Sumantra. That sent a pang of joy through his war-toughened heart and brain. It was Sumantra the old, now grown very old, charioteer of Dasaratha. "My own father's shadow," he cried. Then unable to speak any more he and Lakshmana lost themselves in Sumantra's embrace.

"O my sons, O my masters, O Dasaratha's own image!" The ancient charioteer shed tears like a flood unlocked.

At Guha's gates Rama gave up the chariot of the gods, sending it back with thanks to Indra. Now seated in Sumantra's chariot, the royal vehicle of the house of Surya, the two brothers and Sita set out with Guha preceded by monkeys who swarmed around every milestone of the king's high road. After them banana peels paved the way like gold. This made Sumantra's task of driving his horses

on such a road most difficult. But he was a seasoned charioteer, he brought his precious passengers to Ayodhya without losing even an extra hour.

And what a sight greeted him! It was not that city through which he had driven fourteen years earlier with an empty chariot. Then only deserted streets and shut doors and windows faced his sad eyes. Now he heard music at every step. "From latticed balconies luminous faces gleamed in splendour" and pleasure: conches were blown, flowers were showered from housetops, and songs flung like a mantle for his horses to tread on. Faces, faces, faces brimming with love and gaiety lit the whole city like lamps. With Rama joy returned to a city widowed of joy for fourteen years.

First Rama went to his mother Kausalya. There Dasaratha's other wives and the wife of Lakshmana awaited to receive the three exiles. After the first flush of joy they all went to the court room and there Bharata and Satrughna handed back the kingdom to Rama.

They took down his gem-studded shoes from the throne and put them on his feet. Then the aged royal priest Vashistha pronounced his blessings. After taking the dust from the priest's feet—for a priest is higher than a king—Rama and Sita ascended the throne and when the challenge was made asking if there was anyone who sought to dispute Rama's claim, only silence dared answer. That sealed

the ceremonies. Rama was the unchallenged ruler of Ayodhya for his lifetime.

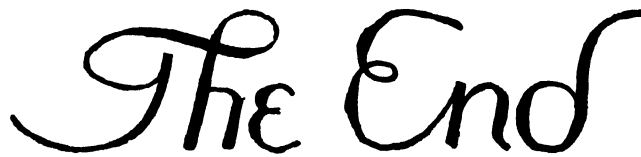
After a month of feasting and amusement Guha went back to his home. Then all the monkeys loath to return to Kishkindha took leave with breaking hearts and set out for the south.

But there was one who stayed behind. It was Hanuman. He decided to stay as Rama's bodyguard. And because of his loyalty, prowess and humility Rama gave him this boon: "In the ages to come many people will look upon thee, my son Hanuman, as the god of athletics." Since whatever Rama said came true, even now in India every athletic society, every gymnasium, and every swimming club carries as its emblem and patron deity an image of Hanuman the monkey.

Here Valmiki's song of Rama ends. Tradition has it that he composed the Ramayana in the great monarch's lifetime and taught it to Rama's two sons Kush and Lava. After a thousand years of their father's reign when Kush came to the throne, legend has it, that with the help of his brother Lava he had two minstrels and poets taught to recite the Ramayana with proper measure, accent and consecration. Since then by word of mouth it has been taught from generation to generation. He who reads the epic of Valmiki is not reading a book but listens to gen-

erations of voices who have sung and are still singing in the hamlets of the east—the Mirror of Rama.

Since the time of Rama thousands of years have passed yet there has been no king or government that has surpassed his wise and kind rule. Today if any Hindu wishes to compliment a ruler he says "he is Rama-like." If they are well ruled they say, "Now we live in Rama-rajya—Rama's government." In one word Rama is the height of our imagination. As for Sita whenever we pay high compliment to a woman we say that she is like Sita. Similarly the excellence of a brother's loyalty for brother we indicate by saying, "He is a brother like Bharata. The other one is a brother like Lakshmana." "If Valmiki were born again," runs a rustic saying, "and if he cast about for a plot for his poetic art he would choose again the story of Rama and sing his sloka—song." The Ramayana was not a tale but a model of life. May you be a man, O my reader, like Rama; or if a girl may you be another Sita.



E. Pavin d'Aulaire - New York - 1930